

The Relationship between EFL Learners' Self-Efficacy in
Writing and Writing Performance across Genders

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Since Albert Bandura first introduced the concept of self-efficacy, researchers have found evidence to support his claim, which suggests that the more people believe in their capabilities to succeed in a task, the better they will perform. Therefore, the skills and abilities people have are not the only matters which affect performance. This thesis studied how 41 Finnish first-year university students describe themselves as English writers, their writing self-efficacy levels, and whether their self-efficacy beliefs correlate with their writing performance.

The data were collected by using a questionnaire including a modified version of Prickel's (1994) writing self-efficacy scale. In addition, the subjects wrote a business message. The questionnaire included a few background questions as well as one open-ended question, which asked the subjects to describe themselves as writers of English. These writer descriptions were grouped and analysed by comparing their tone and content to the subjects' reports of their earlier success at school. By analysing the writing self-efficacy scores, most of the subjects portrayed a moderate level of writing self-efficacy. The male and female subjects' self-efficacy scores were compared using a statistical analysis tool SPSS 25, but the difference was not statistically significant. Conversely, when comparing writing performance, the difference between the male and female subjects' writing performance was found to be statistically significant, with the female subjects outperforming the male subjects. However, it was found that there was no correlation between the self-efficacy score and writing performance, even though the concept of self-efficacy is based on the assumption that higher self-efficacy is related to better performance.

The limitations of the study were its small sample size and the fact that self-efficacy is not directly observable. Similar to other studies based on self-reports, the data of the present study were based on the answers of the subjects, and because there are also a number of other factors which affect people's behaviour, definitive conclusions on the role of self-efficacy cannot be determined. However, the findings of the present study offer a glimpse of how Finnish university students evaluate themselves as writers of English, and how these writing beliefs influence their performance. In the future, more studies examining the role of self-efficacy in different contexts and in relation to different factors are needed in order to broaden our understanding of the concept. In addition, more longitudinal studies examining the development of self-efficacy beliefs are needed in the future.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, self-efficacy, writing

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	1
2 Self-Efficacy	3
2.1 Sources of Self-Efficacy	6
2.2 Dimensions and Mediating Processes of Self-Efficacy	9
2.3 Writing Self-Efficacy	11
2.4 Gender and Writing.....	13
2.5 Self-Efficacy and Performance	15
2.6 Performance Measurement.....	16
2.7 How Does Self-Efficacy Affect Performance?	18
3 Methodology	21
3.1 Research Topics and Questions	21
3.2 Subjects	22
3.3 Data Collection.....	23
3.3.1 Questionnaire and the Business Message	23
3.3.2 Distribution of the Questionnaire.....	26
3.4 Research Methodology.....	27
4 Findings.....	29
4.1 Subjects' Self-Reports.....	29
4.1.1 Reports and Evaluations of Earlier Success and Skills.....	29
4.1.2 Writer Descriptions	30
4.2 Writing Self-Efficacy Scale Scores.....	35
4.2.1 General View of the Scores.....	35
4.2.2 Self-Efficacy Scale Scores by Gender	37
4.3 Writing Task Scores	40
4.3.1 Overview of the Writing Task Scores.....	40
4.3.2 Comparing the Performance of Male and Female Subjects.....	43
5 Discussion	45
5.1 Qualitative research.....	45
5.2 Quantitative research.....	47
5.3 Limitations of the present study and recommendations for future	50
6 Conclusion	53
References	55

Appendices

Appendix 1: Writing self-efficacy questionnaire

Appendix 2: Writing self-efficacy scale statements' total mean scores and mean scores by gender

Appendix 3: Scatterplots of the relationship between self-efficacy score and writing performance

Appendix 4: Finnish summary

List of Figures

Figure 1 The sources of self-efficacy.....	7
Figure 2 Distribution of the writing self-efficacy scale scores.....	35
Figure 3 Writing self-efficacy scores by male subjects.....	37
Figure 4 Writing self-efficacy scores by female subjects.....	38
Figure 5 Writing task scores by gender.....	42
Figure 6 Scatterplot of the subjects' self-efficacy scores and business message points.....	44

List of Tables

Table 1 Business message writing scores.....	41
Table 2 Subjects with the lowest and highest self-efficacy and their performance.....	42

1 Introduction

Beliefs of personal efficacy play a key role in exercising influence over what people do, and how much they are willing to pay time and effort on a task. The term self-efficacy, first introduced in 1970s by Albert Bandura, refers to a person's belief in his or her capability to succeed in a particular task (Bandura 1997, 11). If belief in one's own self-efficacy is lacking, people are more likely to avoid committing to a task, whereas belief in one's own capability encourages us to try and exert effort in the task at hand. Naturally, being highly self-efficacious does not lead to success if the skills that are required to perform a certain task are lacking. Instead, self-efficacy works by influencing the decisions and actions people are willing to carry out, as well as the amount of effort and perseverance, which affects the performance either positively or negatively.

The significance of studying self-efficacy in order to better understand human behaviour is reflected in the number of researchers for whom self-efficacy has become their topic of interest. These researchers include for instance above all Albert Bandura and other widely known experts, such as Pintrich, Schunk, and Pajares, whose studies are discussed throughout this thesis. The role of self-efficacy in relation to many types of actions has been studied since the introduction of the concept. Since writing is a challenging productive task even when it is done using one's L1 (*first language*), doing it in a foreign language is likely to spark different types of thoughts and emotions in people. Therefore, conducting a study on the matter in Finnish university setting was seen meaningful. All of the subjects of the present study are studying English as a foreign language (*EFL*). Understanding the importance of self-efficacy, the affective factors, and its positive effects on performance could help both teachers and students to reach the full academic potential. Schunk and Pajares (2009, 48) have noted that since most of the studies considering self-efficacy in academic environment are conducted in the United States, there is a need for more studies on the subject in different cultures.

The focus of the present study is in examining the subjects' writing self-efficacy, their level of writing self-efficacy and if that and their performance correlate, and whether the male and female subjects differ in this respect. The qualitative aspect of the study focuses on how the subjects define themselves as writers of English. The topics of interest are studied through three research questions which are:

- 1) What kind of perceptions do the students have of themselves as English writers and what is their level of writing self-efficacy?
- 2) Do the subjects' self-efficacy beliefs and performance correlate?
- 3) What kind of differences can be found when comparing male and female students' thoughts of themselves as writers, their writing self-efficacy, and performance?

The present study seeks to answer these questions through a quantitative study that includes some qualitative aspects. The writing self-efficacy scale and questionnaire used to collect data was administered to a group of first-year students of the School of Economics in Turku, Finland. The subjects also wrote a business message at the end of the course, and the scores of the writing task were used as data in the present study. By using correlational analysis and analysis of the questionnaires and writing task scores, the subjects were compared on both individual level and in relation to each other. In addition, throughout the present study, the scores and answers of male and female subjects are compared and contrasted.

In this thesis, the concept of self-efficacy and its different dimensions are first presented in order to offer a clear background for discussing the present study later. After that, the focus of the Theoretical Section moves on to explain how self-efficacy is related to writing and performance. Next, the methodology of the present study, as well as subjects and hypotheses are presented, after which the results of the study are presented and discussed. Firstly, the qualitative aspect of the study is covered by looking at the subjects' answers to the questionnaire's open-ended question. Secondly, the data obtained from the writing self-efficacy scale and the scores of the subjects' written text will be analysed and compared, looking for possible correlations. Lastly, conclusions and suggestions for further research are presented.

2 Self-Efficacy

A few decades ago, Albert Bandura (1977) introduced the concept of *self-efficacy* as a part of his bigger theoretical framework, *the social cognitive theory*. The social cognitive theory posits that performance is dependent on three cooperating factors, and that the interplay, or *triadic reciprocity*, among personal, environmental, and behavioural influences has an impact on human behaviour. Linked to the beliefs and personal factors is the concept of self-efficacy, which is defined as the individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to perform tasks and activities at an appropriate level (Bandura 1986, 391). However, they are not simply estimates of future actions, but also estimates of behaviour, thoughts, and emotional reactions (Bandura 1986, 393). Bandura (1997, 3) claims that self-efficacy beliefs influence the individuals' decisions, perseverance and thought processes, and therefore affect almost everything people do. He names conceptions of personal efficacy the most influential aspect of self-knowledge in our everyday lives (Bandura 1986, 390). People constantly make decisions about what actions they are willing to perform in various social milieus, and tend to avoid tasks and environments, which somehow exceed their perceived capabilities (Bandura 1986, 393). Therefore, accurate beliefs of individual's own capabilities are needed in order to function successfully (ibid.).

Bandura (1997, 21) made a distinction between the terms self-efficacy and *outcome expectations*; the former is associated with the person's beliefs about their capability to perform a certain action, whereas the latter focuses on the consequences of their behaviour. Pintrich and Schunk (2002, 161) explain that from a motivational point of view, outcome expectations are important. These expectations make people think about the possible outcomes of their actions and lead them to act in ways that bring them closer to the outcomes they value. Academically driven students trust that if they study with appropriate effort, they will attain good grades. Because they value success in their learning, it can be expected that it will motivate them to mobilise effort, and thereby validate their outcome expectations. In other words, they have efficacy judgements of their skills and capabilities to perform tasks, and outcome expectations about how high grades they will achieve (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 162). It is worth to note that although self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations are related, high self-efficacy does not automatically mean that also the outcome expectations are equally high. For instance, in Finnish matriculation examination a student might feel

efficacious for mastering the necessary skills to succeed but hold lower outcome expectations due to the competition for the best grades, which are assessed to fit the normal distribution.

Differentiating self-efficacy from other self-concepts is not always simple. While self-efficacy is concerned with beliefs of personal abilities, self-esteem is related to people's self-worth (Bandura 1997, 11). However, the line between self-efficacy and self-confidence is less clear cut. Bandura (1997, 382) summarises as follows:

Confidence is a nondescript term that refers to strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about. [...] Perceived self-efficacy refers to belief in one's agentic capabilities, that one can produce given levels of attainment. A self-efficacy assessment, therefore, includes both an affirmation of a capability level and the strength of that belief. Confidence is a catchword rather than a construct embedded in a theoretical system. Advances in a field are best achieved by constructs that fully reflect the phenomena of interest and are rooted in a theory that specifies their determinants, mediating processes, and multiple effects. Theory-based constructs pay dividends in understanding and operational guidance. The terms used to characterize personal agency, therefore, represent more than merely lexical preferences. (Bandura 1997, 382)

Even though the two terms can sometimes be used interchangeably, using the term self-efficacy in the present study is justified, since the subject's beliefs of their capabilities are related to a certain type of writing task.

People with high self-efficacy are confident about their abilities to overcome the challenges they may face, whereas low self-efficacy makes people doubt their skills and fear that they may fail (Bandura 1997, 39). This can make people avoid new tasks and activities which might help them learn and develop new skills. In addition, they will miss a chance to receive positive or corrective feedback to diminish the negative self-efficacy perceptions (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 164). Cecil and Pinkerton (2000, 1243) note that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of whether a person is likely to engage in an activity. Tasks that are believed to exceed their abilities are likely to be avoided, but more familiar tasks are performed with ease. This suggests that self-efficacy is firmly based on the individual's previous experiences, which can be either positive or negative. Another factor that affects the perception of self-efficacy is whether the learner holds an entity or incremental theory of ability. Dweck (2000, 82) explains that people who believe that their abilities are more or less fixed and do not

change over time are said to hold an *entity view*, whereas those holding an *incremental view* see abilities as something that can be improved with enough time and effort. Therefore, learners with an incremental theory of ability are more likely to benefit from high self-efficacy.

As Mills (2014, 9) and Pintrich and Schunk (2002, 161) note, self-efficacy bears some similarity to other expectancy-value models such as *task-specific self-concept* and *self-perceptions of competence*. Even though self-efficacy has been widely studied in various domains of educational research, foreign language (*FL*) scholars have emphasised the role of other similar self-constructs in L2 (*second language*) motivation research (Mills 2014, 9). However, there are some differences that make self-efficacy a unique concept. In relation to other expectancy constructs, self-efficacy is more situation specific (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 165). Self-efficacy is not only a self-recognition of being a good student, but rather, for example, explicit perceptions of possessing the right skills for composing different types of sentences and paragraphs; “the behavioral actions or cognitive skills that are necessary for competent performance in a given domain” (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 161). Therefore, when assessing self-efficacy by using questionnaires or interviews, researchers ask the subjects to rate their confidence for performing a certain type of task instead of evaluating themselves more broadly for instance as language learners or users. The more general the statements are, the greater is the responsibility on participants to try to understand what they are actually meant to evaluate (Bandura 1997, 39). In the present study, the subjects are asked to evaluate how well they think they can for example spot their spelling mistakes and express their ideas in English in a business writing task. Closely related to this situational specificity, the beliefs learners have about their self-efficacy are argued to be less static and stable than self-concept and self-confidence beliefs (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 165).

Since self-efficacy views are personal, research on the subject is needed in order to explain how people think and feel, and how these beliefs relate to the actions they mobilise (Ritchie 2016, 24). Also concerning the uniqueness of self-efficacy perceptions, Bandura (1986, 391) notes that there is a difference between possessing certain skills and being able to utilise them under changing circumstances. Consequently, individuals with equivalent skills do not perform similarly, and individuals also perform differently depending on the occasion (*ibid.*). Collins, presented in Bandura (1997, 37) studied children’s’ beliefs of their mathematical self-

efficacy. He found out that even though ability affected the performance, the children who evaluated themselves to be more efficacious were more successful and accurate in solving problems. Therefore, self-efficacy can be seen as a meaningful contributor to performance, which functions in part independently of abilities (ibid.).

Since Bandura presented his self-efficacy theory, a great deal of research has been carried out clarifying and extending the role of self-efficacy as a concept affecting behavioural change and maintenance. Information on one's self-efficacy is acquired from four main sources: *personal mastery experience*, *vicarious experiences*, *emotional arousal*, and *social persuasion*. These sources are listed in order of importance, according to Bandura (1986). The four main sources do not directly influence efficacy; they are cognitively appraised and processed. This process, called *efficacy appraisal*, allows the individual to weigh and consider the contributions of these personal and situational factors (Bandura 1997, 80). Therefore, analysing one's self-efficacy requires constant personal evaluation of abilities in order to draw conclusions about the final appraisal. In order to understand the multistage process of self-efficacy, these four sources and the mediating processes are presented in the next two sections.

2.1 Sources of Self-Efficacy

The four main sources of self-efficacy, *personal mastery experience*, *vicarious experiences*, *emotional arousal*, and *social persuasion*, all have a role in the construction of one's self-efficacy, but their power to influence the perceived self-efficacy varies (Leslie 2011, 36). These sources either raise or lower one's self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to perform a certain task (Mills 2014, 8). Next, each of these are briefly presented, before the dimensions and mediating processes, also present in Figure 1, are discussed.

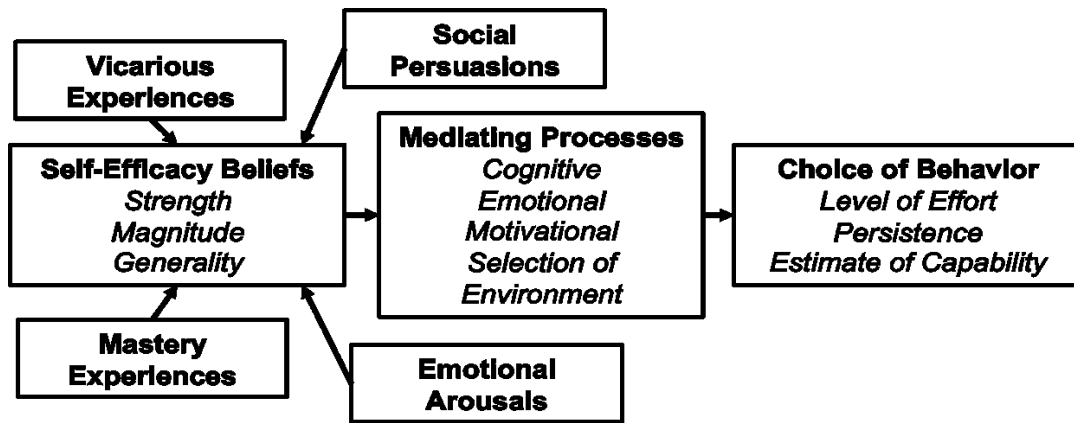


Figure 1 The sources of self-efficacy (Leslie 2011, 36)

Mastery experiences refer to those situations in which information of capability to perform a certain action successfully or not is gained (Bandura 1997, 80). Bandura names mastery experiences as the most important source of self-efficacy beliefs; “[e]nactive mastery produces stronger and more generalized efficacy beliefs than do modes of influence relying solely on vicarious experiences, cognitive simulations, or verbal instruction” (Bandura, 1997, 80). Each task, despite its size, can represent a mastery experience (Ritchie 2016, 26). Also, in order to develop self-efficacy through mastery experiences, people need to experience both difficulties and success during their learning (Bandura 1994, 2). In new undertakings, the individual might not have any kind of previous observation of themselves performing a certain task on which they could base their confidence judgements (Ritchie 2016, 26). In relation to the present study, the students have not very likely written a business message during their earlier studies, which means that they cannot base their evaluations directly on previous experiences. However, they have produced different kinds of texts and read examples of business messages during the course, which has enabled them to evaluate their confidence in producing similar texts. In addition, even when there is no direct experience with a task, the self-efficacy beliefs are still always based on something (Ritchie 2016, 26), and as the participants of the present study have studied English for years, they all have previous experience in English writing. Good performances contribute to the expectation of future success. However, it is worth noting that after repeated successful performances, it is unlikely that an occasional failure will shatter one’s trust in their capabilities (Mills 2014, 8). Consequently, failures should not be seen only as a negative thing, because they also shape the view of one’s self-efficacy.

Information about self-efficacy is obtained from performance and experiences, but also *vicariously* by comparing one's own performance with those of others (Bandura 1997, 86). In classroom situation, observing peers' success or failure in completing a task offers a valid basis for comparison, and it provides an opportunity to appraise their abilities (Leslie 2011, 37). Judging their own performance in comparison to that of others may raise or lower the observers' self-efficacy (Schunk and Zimmerman 1998, 141). If the peers can succeed, the learners are more inclined to believe that they can as well. They are less likely to feel the same if they are observing an older, more competent learner or an adult performing the same action (Schunk 2007, 10). However, if the person observing a peer has also taken part in the same activity earlier, and therefore has developed mastery experiences, their personal experience will affect the level of self-efficacy more than what is gained by observing others (Ritchie 2016, 27). While this is an important factor of Bandura's original self-efficacy theory, Ritchie (2016, 24) reports the notion of some researchers, which suggest that social comparison is not a basis on which mature learners form their self-efficacy beliefs.

Learners may also receive direct information about whether they have what it takes to succeed, strengthening or weakening their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1994, 2). This *social persuasion*, which can be either verbal or non-verbal, encourages the learners to participate in activities or attempt new strategies, and shapes the learners' beliefs of their self-efficacy (Schunk 2007, *ibid.*). Positive comments from parents and teachers can increase perceived self-efficacy, and it will be substantiated if they perform well, whereas poor performance can make the effect only temporary (Schunk 2003, 161). However, the encouraging words and other messages will not be effective unless the recipient believes that the sender is trustworthy and has some sort of expertise in the task at hand (Bandura 1997, 104). Naturally, people do not believe everything they are told about their abilities. If performance and what has been said about one's capabilities do not match, the person may become sceptical (*ibid.*). The effect of social persuasion is diminished as the learners gain more experience, after which they are less likely to trust encouraging words from a teacher without backing experience, or if they feel like they lack the requisite skills (Ritchie 2016, 28). In addition, if success is promised but not achieved, the failure will override the previous feeling of encouragement, which will result in having a far more damaging impact than not saying anything, according to Ritchie (2016, 29).

The fourth factor people rely on when judging their chances to succeed are their *physiological or emotional states*, often associated with physical activities, but which also apply to stressful situations (Bandura 1997, 106). These bodily symptoms, which are related to feeling anxious, can be interpreted to indicate lacking skills, whereas feeling calm and relaxed while taking tests can make the learner trust their own skills, resulting in higher self-efficacy (Schunk and Zimmerman 2007, 10). This fourth and final factor, also present in Figure 1, is the least influential on person's self-efficacy beliefs, and positive mastery and vicarious experiences can override the nervousness (Ritchie 2016, 30). However, if the person lacks experience or the previous experiences have resulted in failure, other factors become more important to the creation of self-efficacy judgements (ibid.). Like other feelings and beliefs, these physiological and emotional states change over time. Even if someone has previous successful mastery experiences in performing a certain task, it is possible that on a different occasion they feel differently (Ritchie 2016, 30). The person's mood also affects the judgement of personal efficacy (Bandura 1994, 3). Another way of altering the beliefs of self-efficacy is "to reduce people's stress reactions and alter their negative emotional proclivities and misinterpretations of their physical states" (ibid.). As can be expected, positive mood enhances the feeling of self-efficacy, whereas feeling low diminishes it.

2.2 Dimensions and Mediating Processes of Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1977, 194), self-efficacy varies along three dimensions, which are *magnitude*, *generality*, and *strength*, also present in Figure 1, which all have important performance implications. *Magnitude* refers to the level of difficulty of the task. Low-magnitude tasks, such as writing an e-mail to a friend, are easier to perform, whereas learners may feel less confident in performing more challenging tasks, for instance writing an official complaint to a company. Efficacy beliefs differ also in *generality*. Bandura (1997, 43) explains that certain skills are more generalisable than others, which means that even a slight change in the task content or environment in which the task is performed can affect the outcome. This means that self-efficacy beliefs have different "predicting power" depending on the task; good self-efficacy in essay writing does not mean that the student feels confident when speaking in front of an audience. In addition, the *strength* of efficacy determines the level of confidence

the person has for performing the task (ibid.). High expectations help the learner to cope despite the challenges they encounter. By contrast, weak expectations of mastery can be discouraging, and the individual may be inclined to avoid certain types of tasks. Bandura (1997, 43) argues that the stronger “the sense of personal efficacy . . . the greater the perseverance,” but adds that the “strength of perceived self-efficacy is not necessarily linear”.

As presented in Figure 1, the sources of self-efficacy information do not in itself build the general picture of self-efficacy. Instead, self-efficacy beliefs adjust behaviour via four mediating processes: *cognitive, motivational, emotional, and selection of environment* (Bandura 1997, 116–160). These mediating processes shape our behaviour and can cause individuals to either over- or underestimate their skills and therefore affect the way they act (Bandura 1997, 116). These four processes usually operate alongside each other rather than in isolation (ibid.). Firstly, *cognition* affects self-efficacy beliefs through goal setting, affecting how the individual plans to execute the goals and the level of effort attained to them (Bandura 1997, 116). The perceived level of self-efficacy also affects the scenarios people construct in their head. Those who doubt themselves are more likely to visualise failure, whereas people with higher self-efficacy organise positive courses of action in thought (Bandura 1994, 4).

Secondly, *motivation* plays a key role in self-efficacy. Even though certain people retain a high degree of self-efficacy, they may not bother to use their potential to succeed if they lack motivation. However, people with high motivation who participate in tasks and action are more likely to gain positive mastery experiences, further strengthening their perceived self-efficacy (Bandura 1997, 130). The third mediating process, *emotion*, affects the individual’s coping abilities in stressful situations. People may impair their functioning through negative thinking, which results in poor performance (Bandura 1994, 5). However, Bandura (1994, 6) notes that “[i]t is not the sheer frequency of disturbing thoughts but the perceived inability to turn them off that is the major source of distress”. Bandura (1997, 145) explains that because people are able to have an influence on how they think and feel, they are also able to influence their behaviour through those thought processes to a certain extent.

Finally, the types of activities and *environments* are influenced by the beliefs of personal efficacy (Bandura 1994, 7). By avoiding situations that exceed their coping capabilities, individuals try to avoid failure, but readily select situations in which they think they can succeed (ibid.). In addition to influencing the types of activities in which

people partake, beliefs of self-efficacy affect the types of social environments they select (Bandura 1997, 160). However, as Bandura (1986, 393–4) explains, large self-efficacy misjudgements in either direction can result in poor consequences. Individuals who have a great deal of trust in their own capabilities are likely to undertake actions that are beyond their abilities, resulting in difficulties and failures, while individuals with low self-efficacy cut themselves off from possibly rewarding experiences. In the present study, the participants are obliged to participate in the writing task if they want to pass the course, and therefore are not likely to avoid it. Writing a business message is a task that is very suitable for assessing the self-efficacy of the participants of this study, because it offers a challenging task, which slightly exceeds their previous writing tasks in difficulty, yet is reasonably challenging.

As the first part of this Theoretical section suggests, the formation of self-efficacy is a complex process. Without mediating processes that shape behaviour, sources of self-efficacy are insufficient to alter self-efficacy beliefs and vice versa. However, by strengthening these mediating processes, such as feelings of efficacy that facilitate motivation, positive mood and experiences of success, a positive reciprocal process can be set in motion (Bandura 1997, 160). In the next chapter, the effect of self-efficacy in a particular task, writing, is discussed.

2.3 Writing Self-Efficacy

Writing self-efficacy is simply defined as the judgement of one's competence in writing, and the individual's judgement of being able to use the set of skills needed to perform different types of writing tasks (Pajares and Johnson 1994, 9). Accordingly, people who have confidence in their writing skills are more likely to engage in writing tasks and overcome difficulties when needed. Writing self-efficacy is influenced by different factors, such as past experience and feedback the individuals have received on their texts. The texts people produce can be quite personal, and it is therefore natural that positive comments and supportive feedback are more beneficial in building one's writing self-efficacy than focusing on the negative. Even though both writing and reading are closely connected to students' verbal abilities, cognitive and motivational variables, one key variable being self-efficacy, also have a strong impact on performance.

Writing a text is a complex, multistage process: it requires planning, revising, editing, and in addition, the production of the actual text. On top of this, writing often requires reading relevant background material, knowing and using appropriate writing conventions, and often producing texts in a second or foreign language with limited language knowledge (Zabihi 2018, 37). These activities are challenging for both L1 and L2 users, but the skill of formulating and expressing ideas well in written form is without a doubt valuable in all types of academic activities. The extended nature of this process poses motivational challenges for some, even though producing a good text can bring intellectual and social rewards to the writer (Bruning and Horn, 2000). Because writing is a productive skill, it can be harder to master in comparison to receptive skills, for example reading (Erkan and Saban, 170). The participants of the present study have written various types of texts in English before their university studies, but the current course is their first English course in university context, at least for the most of them. In addition, they are required to use specific writing conventions and vocabulary that match the task at hand.

According to Hayes (1996, 3–4), the process of writing involves three cognitive processes, which are *the writer's long-term memory*, *the task environment*, and *the process of writing*. These three all constantly interact during the writing process. Long-term memory has a limitless store that holds information and carries out cognitive processes. In relation to writing, it stores knowledge about the topic and the genre. The task environment consists of social factors, such as the intended audience of the text as well as physical ones, such as the text produced so far, which helps to shape what should be written next. The third component, writing, is a complex process, which consists of various stages, such as planning, text generation, and revision of the written text. Erkan and Saban (2011, 116) remark that it is therefore not surprising that even students who are proficient in other language skills feel that expressing their thoughts in written English is beyond their capabilities. They note that the complex character of writing tasks seems to heighten anxiety levels in students, which relates to other affective elements such as demotivation, negative attitudes towards writing, and lower level of self-efficacy in writing.

Proficient writers are able to express their thoughts using proper grammar, vocabulary, and appropriate writing conventions, and know how to express ideas using their own words. However, there are also multiple affective factors that have an influence on writing ability, such as lack of confidence, self-efficacy, and motivation.

If all these factors are on a satisfactory level, the writer is able to spare more energy on their writing process and develop their skills even further (Kirmizi and Kirmizi 2015, 58). This means that the writer needs to self-regulate at several levels. Self-regulation in writing involves three elements according to Bandura's socio-cognitive model: the person, the behaviour, and the environment. Hidi and Boscolo (2007, 8) explain that according to these three elements, numerous self-regulatory activities can be identified and grouped. By setting objectives and assigning time for the writing task, the writer *internally* controls the activity. Secondly, by choosing the best ways of expressing ideas and taking into consideration the text one has already produced, the writer takes control of *behaviour*. In addition, a suitable *environment* for writing is established. Depending on the writer, the best environment varies. Research supports the view that self-efficacy beliefs are more valuable in predicting the level of writing outcomes than other motivational variables, such as writing apprehension or the perceived value of writing. In addition, the writers' self-efficacy beliefs mediate the effect of other factors such as age on writing performance (Pajares and Johnson 1996, 163).

2.4 Gender and Writing

Gender differences in students' academic self-efficacy are often reported, but they are not unanimous. The findings of Wigfield, Eccles and Pintrich (1996) show that during elementary years, boys and girls are equally confident in their mathematic abilities. However, by the time they are in middle school, boys begin to rate themselves to be more efficacious than girls. Similarly, in areas related to arts and languages, female students tend to perform better, but the self-efficacy beliefs of the male students are equally high (ibid.). Pajares (ibid.) suggests that a reason for this might be the tendency of males and females to respond to self-efficacy questionnaires with a different mindset. Wigfield, Eccles and Pintrich (1996) observed that whereas girls tend to be more modest in their answers, boys are not afraid to show their confidence in themselves, whether they actually are skilful in something or not.

Similar to this study, Villalón, Mateos and Cuevas (2013) compared students' beliefs about their writing self-efficacy in relation to their achievement and gender. They found out that writing self-efficacy beliefs and gender were both factors which predicted writing performance. In another study by Pajares and Johnson (1996), the

findings were different. They found no significant effect of gender on performance, but instead, significant direct effects from gender on both self-efficacy and apprehension. Although boys and girls performed equally well, girls had lower self-efficacy beliefs. In the study of Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2015), similar to the present study, participants were grouped as having either low, medium or high level of self-efficacy. By using a self-efficacy scale by Yavuz-Erkan, they were able to examine the subjects' writing self-efficacy in content, design, unity, accuracy, and punctuation. The results showed that none of the participants reported low levels of self-efficacy in any sub-dimension in L2 writing. They also found statistically significant differences between male and female students' writing. Male students ranked higher in three sub-components: design, unity and accuracy. They also found support for their hypothesis that as the students' anxiety decreases, their writing self-efficacy increases, which supports Bandura's notion of the mediating processes, especially emotions, discussed in section 2.2.

The findings in the literature regarding anxiety are not unanimous, but there is some evidence for the assumption that female students are often more anxious than male students (Martinez, Teranishi, Kock and Cass, 2011). This could partly explain differences in performance across genders, since anxiety has been found to affect performance negatively. In addition to the learners' beliefs in their own capability, self-efficacy is closely related to their cognitive skills and motivation. A study conducted by Pintrich and Schunk (2002, 4) portrays motivation as a process that brings about action and suggest that the students who are motivated also report higher levels of self-efficacy. This finding is in line with Bandura's (1997) view, who however notes that good self-efficacy also increases motivation, further supporting each other.

It is of course possible that some of the differences accounted for gender are actually results of factors unrelated to these variables. It has been reported that when previous achievement is controlled, meaning that the students are at the same level of competence, gender differences in academic self-beliefs become smaller or even disappear (Pajares 2002, 118-119). However, in the light of rising consciousness of gender equality, a dualistic categorisation can pose problems when doing research. Looking beyond male and female gender identities is important when conducting future research in any field of science.

2.5 Self-Efficacy and Performance

Over the last 30 years, the relationship among self-efficacy beliefs, behaviour, and motivation has received increasing attention in educational research (Mills 2014, 9). Because self-efficacy beliefs repeatedly predicted success in performance, it became to be seen as a central element to academic success. In the field of FL (*foreign language*) learning, studies on self-efficacy became more frequent in the 21st century (ibid.). Bandura (1997) argues that what individuals do with the skills and knowledge they have and their level of commitment in task-performing can often be determined by their perceived self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is believed to affect the amount of effort put into completing a task, and it also impacts how people persist when they encounter difficulties and distractions (Bandura 1986, 394). Bandura (ibid.) points out that self-efficacy affects the level of effort differently when it is related to learning and performance. In learning tasks, those who already feel highly efficacious in completing a certain task may be inclined to put less effort in preparatory acquisition of knowledge but are at the same time more likely to sustain effort when applying the requisite skills in action. Accordingly, experiencing some uncertainty in one's own capabilities is not necessary harmful, since it can benefit the preparation process (ibid.). Naturally, people have differing self-beliefs in relation to the type of task they encounter, and therefore self-efficacy can be regarded as task-specific (Zabihi 2018, 37). For example, a strong sense of self-efficacy is likely to affect individuals' writing positively, not because it influences their writing directly, but because it leads to greater interest and better attention to the task, stronger effort, and greater perseverance when dealing with problems they may face (Pajares and Johnson 1996, 163).

Bandura (1997, 67–8) points out that an important factor which affects the degree of relation between assessments of self-efficacy and performance is elapsed time. Naturally, the causation between the two is most accurately revealed when they are measured in close temporal proximity, whereas long temporal disparity may cause misinterpretations. However, this does not mean that the prediction of behaviour in relation to self-efficacy beliefs over longer periods of time is not possible at all, because self-efficacy beliefs predict performance also under longer timespans. A factor that is in reality more important than time is whether intervening experiences have altered the self-efficacy beliefs. Since self-efficacy beliefs are not stable but static in nature, they differ by the way they have been acquired, by their strength, and by

what Bandura calls *the potency of intervening experiences*. For instance, efficacy strength is likely to fluctuate when the time to perform an important task becomes closer. However, beliefs of self-efficacy that are firmly established can predict action reliably for years, and change in them occurs only through major disconfirming experiences. In the present study, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants approximately two months before they wrote the graded business message. During the two-month time period they continued their English studies, but it is not very likely that they experienced any major drawbacks in their language learning which would account for strong changes in their level of self-efficacy. However, given fluctuating performance, it is not always easy to determine whether discrepancies between performance and self-efficacy beliefs reflect misjudgements of capability, or whether the task chosen to represent particular performance is not applicable (Bandura 1997, 71).

2.6 Performance Measurement

When studying the relationship between self-efficacy and action, it is vital to ensure that they are accurately measured (Bandura 1997, 62). If the scales or other tools used to measure the level of self-efficacy do not measure the same capabilities that govern performance, they cannot be considered to be highly reliable (*ibid.*). It is equally important to make sure that the people judging their self-efficacy have enough knowledge of task demands, because without knowing what skills are needed to successfully perform a task, they cannot reliably judge whether they believe in their capabilities to do it or not (Bandura 1997, 64). Discrepancies between self-efficacy beliefs and actual performance arise when either the task or the circumstances under which the task is performed are unclear to the individuals (*ibid.*). The most common form of discrepancy is one in which the level of self-efficacy exceeds the actual performance. However, as Bandura (1997, 65) points out, overly optimistic beliefs of own capabilities do not always stem from overestimation of one's capabilities. It can also reflect inadequate knowledge of what is required to succeed in different kinds of academic environments. Most of the participants of the present study have begun their university studies just a few months prior to answering the self-efficacy questionnaire and writing the business message, which could result in them overestimating their skills and therefore poorer preparation. However, it is equally possible that after

successfully completing the entrance exam, they have high motivation and invest a great deal of effort in their new field of study.

As Mills (2014, 14) notes, even though the growing number of FL self-efficacy studies provides us with valuable information, mismeasurement is a problem common in many academic domains. As Bandura (1986) advises, self-efficacy needs to always be measured with a specificity that corresponds both to the task and domain at hand. If self-efficacy studies lack specificity, the results do not offer valid information to evaluate the influence of self-efficacy on language learning and performance. Pajares (1996, 4) agrees with this view, noting that much self-efficacy assessments reflect generalised attitudes about people's beliefs in their capabilities, while bearing little or no resemblance to a specific task. Even though some information about students' writing self-concept may be acquired by asking subjects to for instance rate their writing ability on a scale from one to ten, an item this broad does not include task and domain specificity, thus lacking value in self-efficacy research.

In some studies, items measuring other constructs were combined with self-efficacy items. In an article written by Morgan and Jinks (1999), an instrument used to gain insight into children's beliefs of their self-efficacy regarding performance was introduced. However, the scale presented in the article, The Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scale, includes, despite its name, items that measure FL *self-concept* "I am a good reading student" and items which measure *effort* such as "I work hard in school" in addition to statements that truly measure self-efficacy. Mills (2014, 16) points out that although these factors are closely associated with self-efficacy beliefs, the use of a scale measuring multiple constructs at the same time makes it difficult to evaluate the influence of self-efficacy on FL learning and performance. Therefore, when choosing a scale for the present study, the task at hand was kept in mind, and the existing self-efficacy scale developed by Prickel (1994) was slightly modified to better fit the present study. The content of the self-efficacy scale used in this study will be explained in more detail in section 3.3.1. Furthermore, it has been found that scales with response formats which operate on the same range in which students are typically graded are psychometrically stronger, and therefore make the self-evaluation easier. Therefore, using a 5-point Likert scale in the present study is suitable in Finnish university environment in which the performances of the students are graded by using the same scale.

2.7 How Does Self-Efficacy Affect Performance?

Schunk (2003) notes that achievement and self-efficacy create a reinforcing cycle. The students' positive self-efficacy beliefs influence persistence and performance, whereas this progress towards their goals enhances their self-efficacy for continued learning. Furthermore, whereas individuals with higher level of self-efficacy have tendency to attribute good performance to themselves and internal factors such as preparation and persistence, students who report low self-efficacy exhibit less personal control for poor outcomes and attribute possible success to external factors, such as easy tests (Mills 2014, 18).

As noted earlier in the Theoretical Section, environmental factors and personal factors have an effect on each other. Learners with high self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards the tasks view them as challenges and by that create a productive learning environment. Language learners with a high level of self-efficacy believe in their abilities to organise the learning environment in a way that benefits their learning. "By selecting their environment, people can have a hand in what they choose to become" (Bandura 1997, 160). This view of Bandura is in line with the social cognitive view of human agency, which highlights the fact that individuals actively shape their environment simultaneously as the environment shapes them (Leslie 2011, 39).

Previous research has demonstrated that writing self-efficacy is correlated positively with writing performance. For example, Prat-Sala and Redford (2012) examined the relationship between self-efficacy in writing and writing performance using a 12-item scale containing items evaluating university students' level of self-efficacy, such as "How well can you provide relevant evidence to support your argument?". The participants, who were psychology students studying at a UK university, wrote essays of different length related to their field of study, which were later graded by their lecturers. The results showed that writing self-efficacy was significantly related to the writing performance. Other researchers interested in the subject have attained similar results in various environments. Tanyer (2015) investigated whether Turkish first-year EFL pre-service teachers' writing self-efficacy affected their performance in essay writing. She found out that self-efficacy beliefs had significant positive relationship with foreign language writing performance. Woodrow (2011) conducted a study focusing on self-efficacy and anxiety of college students in China, where English has an important role as a necessary second or foreign

language. Similar to the present study, the measures of the subjects' self-efficacy were compared to their performance in a writing task. In her study, Woodrow also studied the subjects' writing anxiety. The findings by Woodrow (2011) indicate that self-efficacy related more strongly to performance than did anxiety, and that the highly self-efficacious students also showed desirable learning attributes. The qualitative data obtained from the study suggested that highly efficacious students show more effort and have intrinsic reasons for studying, whereas anxious students do not perform as well, show less effort and are more likely to have extrinsic reasons for studying English.

The objective of a study by Erkan and Saban (2011) was to find out whether writing performance is related to the subjects' apprehension, defined as "the tendency of a person to avoid the process of writing - particularly when it is to be evaluated in some way" noted by Daly and Miller, explained in Erkan and Saban (2011, 181). In relation to this, the researchers also wanted to find out what role self-efficacy and attitudes towards writing have in this combination. The subjects of this study were university EFL learners, similar to the present study. As Erkan and Saban (2011, 167) note, expressing ideas with a certain level of accuracy and coherence in a foreign language is a major achievement. It is therefore natural that some view writing tasks as something that is beyond their command of the language, thus lacking writing self-efficacy. In order to investigate how the different variables relate to each other, a writing apprehension test, a writing self-efficacy scale, and a questionnaire towards writing were used. The same writing self-efficacy scale developed by Yavuz-Erkan was also used in a study by Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2015) mentioned in section 2.4. By using the Pearson correlation coefficient, Erkan and Saban (2011) found positive correlation between the EFL subjects' self-efficacy in writing and writing performance in *design-unity*, which were blended to a single subscale in this study, and *accuracy* subscales. In this study, other subscales were not statistically correlated.

Even though numerous studies show the importance of self-efficacy on achievement, high self-efficacy itself does not produce competent performances if other important factors, such as knowledge and skills, are lacking. Bandura (1994, 2) points out that putting effort in a certain task signifies that the learner believes that the action leads to positive outcomes. Even learners with high self-efficacy do not reach their potential if their *outcome expectations*, explained earlier in the beginning of the Theoretical section, are not positive. The usefulness of the learning, or *perceived*

value, has an effect on the learning, because even if the learners have doubts about their skills and about the possible outcome, they are more likely to attempt the activity if it seems valuable. If the task is viewed as both valuable and having a positive outcome, the self-efficacy of the learner is likely to affect their effort, persistence, and achievement (Bandura 1994, 2). For example, tasks that let the learners practice skills they will need later in working life are seen highly valuable (Schunk 2003, 161). Many of the subjects of the presents study will have to know how to communicate using written English later in their education and in their work life. Therefore, it can be presumed that at least some of them regard English courses and the assignments belonging to the course material valuable.

Having or experiencing lower levels of self-efficacy does not automatically affect the performance in a negative way. Even though low self-efficacy is typically related to poorer performance, some previous research indicate that a slightly lower level of self-efficacy can lead to better learning and greater effort than having a very high level of confidence in accomplishing a task (Salomon 1984). Having a very low level of self-efficacy is demotivating, but a right amount of doubt can be beneficiary in order to mobilise effort and encourage the use of learning strategies, which in some cases result in better performance (Schunk and Zimmerman 1998, 142). Salomon (1984) found that children with high levels of self-efficacy invested time and effort for learning from instructional media they found challenging but learned less from the same information provided by media they believed to be easy. Thus, a right amount of self-doubt may result in successful action and encourage the individual to acquire more knowledge. However, a lack of confidence in one's own abilities hinders proficient use of acquired skills (Bandura 1997, 76). Even though the common view is that higher self-efficacy is related to better performance, there may be some students who report having lower self-efficacy, but still perform as well as or even better than their peers. Scoring low on the self-efficacy scale may also be due to personality, since some people are more modest in their answers than others. This and other factors that possibly affect the score the subjects attain from the self-efficacy scale will be later discussed in more detail in the Discussion section.

Based on earlier research and theoretical background, it can be noted that the relationship between self-efficacy and performance is not linear. Therefore, knowledge of task demands and performance requirements are needed to reliably judge one's own capabilities in performing an action.

3 Methodology

Under this section heading, the methodology of the present study is discussed. Firstly, the topic of my thesis and the research questions will be discussed. After that, the subjects and the questionnaire used to measure the level of self-efficacy of the participants will be presented, as well as the business message, which measures the subjects' performance. Finally, the statistical methods used to analyse the results obtained from the questionnaire and the business message scores will be briefly discussed.

3.1 Research Topics and Questions

As the title of the thesis suggests, the focus of the present study is on the concept of self-efficacy, more precisely on the beliefs individuals have on their own self-efficacy, how these beliefs affect their actual performance in a given task, and whether there are differences between male and female students considering these variables. Three research questions which are of interest in this thesis are:

- 1) What kind of perceptions do the students have of themselves as English writers and what is their level of writing self-efficacy?
- 2) Do the subjects' self-efficacy beliefs and performance correlate?
- 3) What kind of differences can be found when comparing male and female students' thoughts of themselves as writers, their writing self-efficacy, and performance?

The focus of the first research question is on the qualitative aspect of the present study. In addition to presenting a general view of the subjects' thoughts of themselves as writers of English, this section also offers a background for studying research questions 2 and 3, which are handled quantitatively. The questionnaire included one open-ended questions "Using a few words, describe yourself as a writer of English", and the students' answers to this question and two background questions are later presented and discussed in section 4.1. The subjects are likely to describe themselves in different ways, both positively and negatively.

The second research question deals with one of the main ideas of Bandura; the students with higher level of self-efficacy are more likely to perform better. Numerous

previous studies, e.g. Prat-Sala and Redford (2012) and Erkan and Saban (2011), support this hypothesis. The third and final research question is broader, since it concerns the differences male and female students have when comparing their self-reports, self-efficacy beliefs, and their writing performance. The third research question combines the ideas of the first two research questions, and it focuses on comparing the results between male and female students. In what ways do the students' descriptions of themselves as writers differ, and are there differences in how well the self-efficacy beliefs and performance correlate when comparing the two genders? As earlier research, e.g. Pajares and Johnson (1996) suggest, gender can have significant effects on self-efficacy. Throughout the study, one of the objectives is to find out whether the results of the present study support the existing information. For instance, do male students report higher levels of self-efficacy, and do female students seem more modest in their answers as for instance Wigfield, Eccles and Pintrich (1996) have observed?

3.2 Subjects

The subjects of the present study are first-year students studying in the School of Economics, which is a part of the University of Turku. University students were chosen to be studied because they have more experience in English writing than younger students, which enables them to evaluate their level of self-efficacy more reliably. Most of the students have begun their studies the same year the study was conducted, in 2018. The same teacher who was responsible for the course graded the business messages. This was done to ensure that the grading would be as reliable as possible, since the teacher has a great deal of previous experience in grading written texts. This sampling is convenient also because all the subjects were instructed by the same teacher. Therefore, the effect that teaching might have had on the subjects' performance was controlled.

The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 51 years at the time they completed the questionnaire, most of them (73.2%) being 19-21 years old. The total number of participants was 41, out of which 23 were male and 18 were female students. The subjects were all Finnish native speakers, which is why the questionnaire and the brief instructions given before answering to the questionnaire were also in Finnish.

The anonymity of the students was ensured by giving all of them a numbered code. Since gender was one of the variables that was of interest in the present study, a letter representing the students' gender, either *male* (M) or *female* (F), was added in front of the numbered code. The order of the subjects is completely random. On the first page of the questionnaire, the subjects had to indicate whether they gave permission to use the questionnaire and the grade they received from the business message writing task in the study. Since four students did not give permissions to use their answers, and one student had not answered to the second page of the self-efficacy scale, their responses and grades were not used in the study.

3.3 Data Collection

In this section, the tools used to collect data for the study are presented and discussed. Since interviewing almost 50 students would not be very time efficient and too grand considering the scope of this thesis, a questionnaire was chosen as the way to gain information about the participants' self-efficacy beliefs. Business message was selected as the type of written text because of its easy access, and also because the grading made by an experienced teacher would increase the reliability of the study.

3.3.1 Questionnaire and the Business Message

As Setyowati (2016) explains, creating a reliable writing self-efficacy scale is time consuming, and therefore it is justified to use an existing scale developed by acknowledged researchers in the field. She adds that in some studies, general self-efficacy scales are used even though the focus of the research has been writing self-efficacy, and warns that because of this, the results obtained should be taken cautiously. Therefore, using a scale intended to measure writing self-efficacy in particular was seen important for the study's reliability. See Appendix 1 for the writing self-efficacy scale of the present study.

A 25-item writing self-efficacy scale developed by Donald Prickel in 1994 was used as a basis for the writing self-efficacy scale used in the present study. The scale's validity and reliability have been tested after its construction, as well as its utility in correlational analyses (Prickel 1994). The selection of statements present in the final version of the self-efficacy scale is based on a systematic procedure of statistical analyses by selecting the statements that best measure the level of self-efficacy out of

156 initially developed statements. Using correlational analysis, Setyowati (2016) found out that Prickel's writing self-efficacy scale can be used in FL context to reliably measure self-efficacy, and therefore using it in the present study was also considered reliable. The self-efficacy scale used in the present study is mostly identical to the original scale developed by Prickel (1994), apart from a few items which are discussed next.

When modifying the existing questionnaire, it had to be adapted to the study population. The original questionnaire was first translated to Finnish to ensure that all the participants despite their skill level in English would have equal possibilities to answer the questionnaire. Since the indefiniteness of all the key terms in the statements cause unwanted ambiguity and variation among what the participants assume is being measured (Bandura 1997, 40), some of the most important terms were defined before the questionnaires were distributed in class.

Since the original number of statements was considered sufficient, only the content of some of the statements was changed. For instance, statements considering creative writing were substituted with questions which relate better to the business message writing task. Instead of asking the students to rate themselves in relation to how well they believe they perform in "writing a composition that tells a story (for example, a car accident (...))" (Prickel 1994) they expressed their beliefs in matching style with topic in statement number 17. Similar to the original self-efficacy scale by Prickel (1994), the modified scale used in the present study contained statements that were fairly similar to each other. These statements are used to check the reliability of the answers the students give. The assumption is that the students rate themselves truthfully and consistently. This means that the ratings of two statements measuring the same factor should be close to each other, for example in statements 4 "When I write, I can give reasons for my views" and 11 "I am confident that my examples and facts support my written idea".

Similar to the original questionnaire, the questionnaire of the present study used a five-point Likert-scale to measure the level of self-efficacy on each statement. The numbers represent answers as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = unsure, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. In the original version of the scale, some of the statements were worded positively and some negatively. In the present study, the questionnaire was modified to be as clear and easy to answer as possible, and therefore, all the statements were worded positively to avoid confusion. Setyowati (2016) also

suggested doing this by reverse coding some of the items. For example, a statement in the original questionnaire which says “I believe that errors in punctuation and grammar stop me from being a good writer” was changed by wording it positively instead. This also made the analysis of the questionnaires simpler, because all the statements could be awarded with the same number of points as the number related to the answer on the scale. In other words, student who would choose number 3 on the scale when answering a certain statement would be awarded 3 points for that question. Since there were 25 statements in the questionnaire and the maximum number of points awarded for each statement was 5, the highest possible score was 125 (25x5) and the lowest 25 (25x1). The higher the score the subject received, the better the self-efficacy of that subject can be interpreted to be. After the final score of each subject was calculated, it was worded using a three-tier scale (Prickel 1994). Depending on the score, the level of self-efficacy can be seen either *low*, *moderate* or *high*. The level of self-efficacy is low when the subjects has scored less than three points per statement on average, moderate when the score is more than three but less than four on average and high when the average score is four or higher.

A common problem when dealing with a five-point Liker-scale is the neutral/zero value 3. The values in the present study are similar to the typical five-point Likert-scales, but instead of value three having the meaning "neither agree or disagree", it is worded as “unsure” in the questionnaire of the present study. Therefore, the subjects do not have a chance to show that they do not have an opinion on any statement. Consequently, it is justifiable to award 3 points for choosing the middle option on the scale. For example, when answering statement number 15 “I trust my ability to argument and justify my opinions” the subject shows less belief in his or her skills than strongly agreeing by choosing the option “unsure”, but at the same time does not disagree with the statement. None of the subjects of this study showed disinterest by choosing only the middle option for every statement, even though it could be considered tempting and the easiest way to answer a questionnaire.

Another factor that was kept in mind when modifying the existing self-efficacy scale was Bandura’s notion that the self-efficacy items should accurately reflect the construct (Bandura 2006, 308). Because self-efficacy deals with the individual’s perceived ability, the statements should be phrased using words like “can do” instead of “will do”. Although perceived ability is an important determinant of intention, they are separable; *can* is a judgement of capability whereas *will* is a sign of intention

(ibid.). Asking whether someone is able to do something can be answered with a yes or no and has clear limitations, whereas judging one's capabilities suggests that they are boundless and can be developed over time (Ritchie 2016, 29). Based on these notions, the statements were worded "I believe I am capable of..." or "I trust that I can..." instead of "I am able to...".

Since the same questionnaire and many similar types of questionnaires have been successfully used in previous research, distributing a pilot questionnaire was not regarded necessary. For example, Khojasteh, Shokrpour and Afrasiabi (2016) first conducted a pilot study and later used Prickel's writing self-efficacy scale in their study without problem. The judgement that the students would comprehend and be able to successfully answer the questionnaire without ambiguity was supported by the fact that it was in their L1, Finnish, and because the researcher was present when the subjects answered to the questionnaire.

After approximately two months after the questionnaire was distributed to the subjects, the subjects of the study had an exam at the end of the obligatory English course. According to the course curriculum, by the end of the course the students should be able to e.g. "produce effective basic business correspondence" and they "will have adopted and activated vocabulary from English texts related to their field of study". They wrote a business message, which was graded by the teacher of the course. An effective business message which summarises your company and what it has to offer to the world is an essential part of good marketing, and therefore a good test of the students' writing skills. It also reflects the objectives of the foundation course for international business communication. The evaluation criteria included different factors, such as accuracy, structure, and most importantly, the use of specific business terminology. Even though they had not written business messages during the course, they had read examples of them, and it can be assumed that they were aware of what kind of performance was expected of them.

3.3.2 Distribution of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants during their normal lesson in the same classroom in which they normally study English. This was done on two separate occasions, because the students of the course were divided into groups. Both groups answered the questionnaire in mid-October. Distributing the questionnaire to two groups of 25 students seemed sufficient considering the scope of the present study.

However, all of the students were not present when the questionnaires were distributed, which is why the final number of the answers is slightly smaller than expected. Although the questionnaires were distributed on two separate occasions, the instructions and preparations were the same for both groups. The questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the lessons to ensure that the subjects would not answer them in a hurry. The students were given sufficient time to answer the 25-item questionnaire and a few simple basic information questions, around 15 to 20 minutes.

The basic information questions in the beginning of the questionnaire, such as name and age, were added in order to be able to match the answers and the grades of the business message, and it also gave the subjects a chance to get used to answering the questionnaire. The first page also included the open-ended question “Using a few words, describe yourself as a writer of English”. In order to receive answers longer than one word, the space reserved for the answer was two lines long. Both the questionnaire and the first page containing the basic information questions are presented in Appendix 1. The actual purpose of the questionnaire, the assessment of the level of the students’ self-efficacy, was not explicitly stated to guarantee that it would not affect the way the subjects answer in any way. To avoid this, the goal of the study was said to be to simply examine the students’ perceptions of themselves as writers of English. The participants were asked to rate their capabilities of writing a business message. This was made to ensure that the study does not lack specificity, and that they evaluate their writing skills in relation to this specific task, avoiding any misinterpretations of contexts. The fact that the answers would be presented anonymously was clearly stated in both speech and in the questionnaire, as well as the fact that the answers the subjects give would not affect the grading of the course in any way. The reason for this was the aspiration to ensure that the participants would answer according to how they really feel instead of trying to please either the researcher or the teacher of the course.

3.4 Research Methodology

The present study was mostly based on quantitative research, but some content based on qualitative research was also present. Since the questionnaire consisted of mostly numerical data, conducting a quantitative study seemed more apt considering the goals of the study. Due to very little amount of qualitative material, the present study could

not be treated as a mixed methods study. Also, it was noted that by using quantitative research methods, it was possible to produce reliable and replicable results (Dörnyei 2007, 34). In addition, by combining statistical measurements with some qualitative aspects, it was possible to respect the individuality and variety of the subjects. In order to gather more in-depth answers considering the students' beliefs of themselves as writers of English, the questionnaire of the study included one open-ended question "Using a few words, describe yourself as a writer of English", which was mentioned under section heading 3.1. The analysis of the qualitative features was based on grouping similar answers into two main categories.

In addition to the questionnaire, the data of the study consisted of the subjects' business message scores. This enabled me to quantitatively compare the self-efficacy scores of the students and their actual performance in the written task.

Since the questionnaire and basic information questions were in Finnish, the subjects answered them in Finnish. Thus, all the examples of their answers are my translations. I treated the answers to the open-ended question as purely qualitative data. By contrast, the results obtained from the self-efficacy scale and the grading of the business message were treated as quantitative data and analysed using Microsoft Excel 2016 and IBM SPSS Statistics 25. By using Excel, the measures of central tendency of both the writing self-efficacy scale scores and the business writing task scores were calculated. After that, tests of normality were conducted for both self-efficacy scale scores and business writing scores. Since the self-efficacy scale scores did not follow normal distribution, the Mann-Whitney U test was used instead of an independent samples t-test. Conversely, an independent samples t-test was assessed to the normally distributed writing scores. In addition, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the relationship between the two variables. The findings are presented in the next section, followed by a discussion of the results.

4 Findings

In this section, the results of the present study are presented in the same order as the three research questions. Firstly, examples of the subjects' answers to the open-ended question of the study are grouped and presented in section 4.1, covering the qualitative aspect of the present study. Also, a brief overlook of the students' reports of their earlier success at school as well as personal evaluations of their current English skills in general are presented. After that, the focus shifts to the quantitative part of the study by looking at the scores the subjects obtained from the writing self-efficacy scale in section 4.2, as well as their performance in writing the business message in 4.3. The third research question "What kind of differences can be found when comparing male and female students' thoughts of themselves as writers, their writing self-efficacy and performance?" is kept in mind throughout the section.

4.1 Subjects' Self-Reports

Under this section heading, the background information of earlier success provided by the subjects and the results considering the open-ended question of the self-efficacy questionnaire are presented and discussed. The purpose of this is to form and present a general view of the subjects' thoughts of themselves as writers of English and provide a background for the quantitative part of the present study. The answers obtained from the open-ended question are studied qualitatively by grouping the answers based on their content.

4.1.1 Reports and Evaluations of Earlier Success and Skills

On the first page of the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to evaluate their English skills and state their earlier level of success in English at school on a scale from 4 to 10, which is the scale most typically used in Finnish schools. In addition, they were asked to describe themselves as writers of English in a few words. The alternatives for evaluating English skills were excellent, good, satisfactory, and weak. Out of 41 subjects, 12 (29.3%) considered their skills to be excellent, 23 (56.1%) good, and 6 (14.6%) satisfactory. None of the subjects rated their English skills to be weak.

Most of the subjects' evaluations and previous success matched. Those who evaluated their skills to be excellent stated their success at school to have been 9-10,

those who considered themselves to be good ranged from 8-9 and the subjects who stated their skills to be satisfactory reported grades ranging from 7-8. However, some of these answers did not match with the numeric evaluation the subjects had reported. For example, subjects M22 and F6 whose success at school was reported to have been 9 on average considered their own skills to be on a satisfactory level, whereas M12 considered his skills to be good even though his earlier success was reported to have been 10 on average, which suggests that his skills have been in fact excellent. All three subjects had begun their studies in 2018 and they were 21 years old or under when they answered to the questionnaire. Hence, the imbalance between their evaluations is not due to for example the fact that there would have been a long time period between the school grades and the time they answered the questionnaire. In that situation, the imbalance could be explained for example by assuming that the subjects fear that their English skills could have deteriorated due to less use and exposure.

4.1.2 Writer Descriptions

The last item on the first page of the writing self-efficacy questionnaire asked the students to describe themselves as writers of English. The purpose of this item was to encourage the students to think about their writing self-efficacy, and to obtain more in-depth data by giving them a chance to express their thoughts in their own words in addition to the self-efficacy scale.

The students' answers showed variation. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 94–95) recommend grouping similar answers together as a way of handling and analysing qualitative data. They note that it is not purposeful to create a great number of categories, since the goal of the grouping is to compress the qualitative data. Consequently, the answers were divided into two main groups based on how the subjects described themselves. The first answer group represents those who had chosen to describe themselves in relation to their *skills* or *skill level*, whereas the second group had decided to focus on their *qualities* as English writers. However, the two groups are not mutually exclusive, because some of the subjects had included both aspects to their answers. There were also answers that did not fit into either of the groups. Examples of these types of answers are presented towards the end of this section. Also, the length of the answers varied; some of the subjects wrote two or three words, while others used full sentences. Two subjects had left the question blank.

First, a few examples of answers which are based on describing the subjects' *skill level* are presented. The examples include the English translations as well as the subject's code in parentheses. The subjects' answers included evaluations like comparatively poor (M22), on a good level (M1), pretty poor (M2), quite good (M5), worse than as a speaker (F2), in my opinion, good (F1). These subjects described their skill level using words like good and poor, but often these descriptions included some explanations and details. For example, subject M23 described himself "average, *because* I have not written texts in English in several years" (emphasis added) and subject M5 reported being "quite good, *but* I could increase my vocabulary" (emphasis added). These kinds of clarifications were common when the subjects described their skill levels both positively and negatively. When they appeared together with positive descriptions, they serve as reminders of the subjects' limitations, and highlight the fact that none of the subjects consider themselves as very advanced writers of English and feel uncertain at least about some of aspects of their English skills.

On the other hand, some of the students had decided to describe themselves in relation to the *qualities* they think they possess. The subjects described themselves as follows: inventive, clear (M6), inconsistent: sometimes writing goes perfectly, sometimes it does not (M4), efficient, descriptive, (good enough) (M11), lexically, structurally and contentwise versatile and expressive (F15), creative but erroneous (M15). Those who focused on qualities in their answers used a variety of adjectives to describe themselves. Similar to previous examples, the subjects used the word "but" to clarify and add more information about how they see themselves as writers.

One of the qualities that was mentioned in a few answers was the adjective *fast*. In academic context there is often a certain time limit for writing, which is why some of the subjects may consider it an important quality that is worth mentioning. For instance, subject F13 wrote that she is "good in producing text in a short amount of time". However, some of the subjects clarified that because they are fast writers, they are prone to make mistakes in their texts. Subject F7 mentioned that she writes fast but makes errors in both grammar and spelling. However, she did not specify whether she believes that the errors are a result of her fast writing pace, or whether she sees being a fast writer as one of her good qualities, even though she makes mistakes.

A few students mentioned that they have not written in English for a while, and therefore showed concern over their current writing skills. Subject M1 judged his skills to be "possibly a bit rusty nowadays" and subject M7 saw himself as a bad writer of

English since he has not studied English in 15 years and has had no need to produce English texts since high school. Whereas both male students seemed to believe that time has affected their writing skills negatively, subject F11 showed trust in her skills in her answer despite a break in her English studies. She had judged her current English skills to be excellent and wrote that “at high school I was always very good, but a break of a few years has slightly weakened my skills. Nevertheless, writing goes well!”. This answer indicates that even though the subject acknowledges that a break from studying English has slightly weakened her skills, she still has confidence in her writing skills.

In addition to these two groups discussed earlier, the subjects described themselves in relation to how well they are able to use different aspects of language, such as grammar and vocabulary. It is not unexpected that the subjects evaluate themselves as English writers in relation to these aspects, since they are often used as evaluation criteria when written assignments are graded. However, knowing how to use proper grammar and vocabulary is not related to written production only, even though using a less strict vocabulary and grammar may be more acceptable in speech in some contexts.

Only two of the subjects mirrored their writing skills in relation to the content of their text. Also, instead of focusing on the parts of language they believe to have mastered, they discussed the aspects in which they make the most mistakes. One of the female subjects expressed discontent in her texts, writing that she would like to be able to “say more than she is able to actually produce” and subject F12 told that “in addition to vocabulary and grammar, I also want to strongly focus on content”. On the basis of very limited amount of data, it is not possible to state findings as generalisable facts. However, it can be questioned whether the small amount of answers relating to content of the texts reflects the notion that evaluations of English writing during basic education and upper secondary school focus strongly on correctness of the written texts, maybe even at content’s expense. It is also possible that the subjects find evaluating the content of their own texts harder than pinpointing the mistakes they have made, and therefore focus on the errors.

11 subjects (26.8%) mentioned vocabulary in their answers. Most of them wrote about vocabulary in relation to its size, wishing they would know more words and be able to increase the versatility of their texts. Subjects M21 and F17 compared their vocabulary knowledge in relation to their grammar skills, writing that “I do not make

many grammar errors, but my vocabulary could be expanded in order to be able to produce various types of texts” (F17). This concern is understandable, since the subjects of the study have begun their university studies only a few weeks before answering the questionnaire, and therefore have not been able to acquire a great deal of vocabulary related to their field of study, economics.

One female subject (F18) described herself as “competent in writing contracts and documents. Vocabulary skills are not perfect, but sufficient”. She had evaluated her English skill level to be excellent. Her answers show a high level of writing self-efficacy, which may be due to her having begun her studies one year ago, and therefore having more experience than most of the other subjects. She was also one of the oldest subjects of the present study, 27 years old. Since the questionnaire did not include information about the subjects’ earlier education, it is not clear whether the subject has studied or worked somewhere that could explain her answer to the open-ended question. The same subject also noted that she knows a fair number of words and terms, but avoids using them in her texts, because she is not certain whether she uses them correctly and in right contexts.

Out of the 11 subjects who mentioned vocabulary in their answers, only two wrote about it positively. Subjects F4 and M9 described themselves being content with their vocabulary skills and reported knowing and using for example synonyms in their texts instead of repeating the same word. Both negative and positive descriptions show that the subjects know that having and knowing how to use an extensive vocabulary is expected of them in order to obtain good grades in writing assignments. If they believe they possess these skills, their self-efficacy can be presumed to be higher than that of those subjects who lack these skills.

In addition to vocabulary, grammar was mentioned in 8 (19.5%) answers. Many of those subjects who had mentioned vocabulary in their answers also described their grammatical skills. Most of the subjects seemed to compare the two, many of them feeling efficacious in using either one of them, but not both equally well. However, half of these subjects who mentioned grammar in their answers wrote about it in a positive fashion, naming it one of the things in which they do not often make errors. The other half reported feeling “uncertain” (M9) or prone to make grammar mistakes in writing. Since proper use of grammar is one of the aspects that is highlighted in education, for a good reason, it is natural that the subjects’ evaluations of their writing self-efficacy include this aspect.

As mentioned earlier, some of the subjects' answers were just a few words long, whereas others had used more effort in their answers to explain why they felt a certain way. Subject M18 was the only one who evaluated himself as a writer based on the given task. He wrote that "if the topic is free of choice, I am able to write a fair amount of reasonable text, but if the topic is fixed, it often feels like I am repeating myself and writing feels forced". Due to self-efficacy being highly task specific, the subject's self-efficacy can be estimated to vary depending on the topic at hand. In the present task, all the subjects wrote about the same predetermined topic, which might not have pleased this subject. However, given that writing a business message is an important skill for someone who is studying economics, the subject may feel more motivated to write about it in comparison to some other topics less related to his field of study that have been present in upper secondary school.

One of the subjects (M20) considered himself to be average as a writer "because although I think I am quite good in English, most of the other students are very advanced nowadays". As noted earlier in section 2.1, information about one's own abilities to perform actions are obtained vicariously especially in classrooms by observing peers. Comparing one's own performance to that of others can either raise or lower the level of one's self-efficacy (Bandura 1997). The answer of the subject can be interpreted to mean that his observations of her peers' high level of command in English has made him doubt his own chances to stand out in comparison to them. Based on the subject's age, it can be judged that the subject has entered university straight after the upper secondary school and after taking part into the Finnish matriculation examination. When taking this examination, the students are forced to compete with each other for the highest grades, which are assessed to fit the normal distribution. Therefore, only the best 5 percent of the students will obtain the highest grade, whereas the highest point of the bell curve and the largest number of grades are reserved for those whose performance reflects average skills. In this case, comparing her own performance to that of others has lowered his self-efficacy, whereas typically seeing peers' success raises the observer's self-efficacy (Bandura 1997, 87).

4.2 Writing Self-Efficacy Scale Scores

In this section, the subjects' writing self-efficacy scores are analysed using statistical methods based on their answers on the writing self-efficacy scale (Appendix 1). In addition to examining the scores as a whole, the scores of male and female students are compared and contrasted.

4.2.1 General View of the Scores

As mentioned earlier in the Methodology section, the subjects were judged to have either low, moderate or high level of writing self-efficacy based on the score they attained after answering the scale. The more points the subjects scored, the better their writing self-efficacy was judged to be. The number of points were matched to a three-tier scale: < 74 points = low, 75-99 = moderate and >100 points = high self-efficacy.

The lowest score on the scale was 62/125 points (F14) and the highest was 112/125 points (M17). The lowest possible score would have been 25 points and the highest 125 points, since all 25 statements were awarded with points ranging from 1 to 5. These scores show that none of the subjects evaluated themselves to be very poor or extremely efficacious when judging themselves as writers of English. The mean of all the students' scores was 91.82, mode was 96, and median was 95, which all represent moderate levels of self-efficacy. The standard deviation of the scores was 12.21.

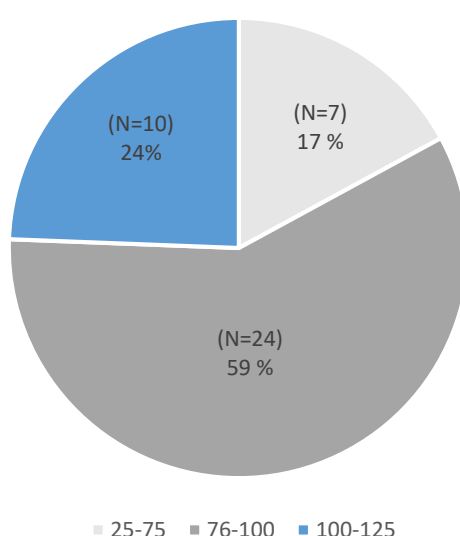


Figure 2 Distribution of the writing self-efficacy scale scores

As shown in Figure 2, more than half of the subjects (N=24) scored 75-99 points from the writing self-efficacy scale, which indicates moderate level of self-efficacy. Based on the scale, 7 subjects have a low level of writing self-efficacy, 24 scored moderate and 10 show high level of self-efficacy. In percentages these results indicate that 59% of the subjects of the present study have moderate writing self-efficacy as English writers, while almost fourth of the subjects showed high levels of self-efficacy.

As long as the mean of the answers is 4 or more, the subjects were judged to have a high writing self-efficacy. When looking at the questionnaires and scales individually, it can be noted that none of the subjects had only chosen answers 4 and 5, which indicates that all of them are unsure at least about some aspects of their writing skills. The same is true also for those students whose scores showed low writing self-efficacy, because none of these subjects chose only 1 or 2 when answering the statements.

When observing the subjects' scores individually, the subject who had attained the lowest score and only half of the possible points, 62/125, is a 19-year-old female student (F14). She reported her earlier success in English to have been 9 on average, which indicates excellent level, and evaluated her skill level in English to be good. She has *not strongly disagreed* with any of the statements but *disagreed* with most of them. For instance, she has disagreed with all the statements that measure the subjects' self-efficacy for error correction. She had chosen the option uncertain for the statements which relate to the content of the produced text as well as her own ideas and arguments. However, in her answer to the open-ended question she wrote that writing is her least strong skill in English, which at least partly explains the result. She also writes about correct spelling being hard for her, which also shows in her answers to the scale.

The highest score is credited to a 24-year-old male student whose earlier success in English at school has also been reported to have been 9 on average. The only statements he has marked *unsure* were statements number 7 "When I write, I believe I can produce a text that matches the topic." and 17 "I trust that I am able to alter my style of writing to match the situation and topic.". These two statements are fairly similar, and both measure the subject's self-efficacy in matching the produced text to the topic at hand. It is not surprising that even the most self-efficacious subject finds this aspect to be the most challenging, since the subjects do not have a great deal or no experience in writing business messages.

4.2.2 Self-Efficacy Scale Scores by Gender

Next, the writing self-efficacy scale scores of male and female subjects are presented separately. In Figures 3 and 4, the colours of the columns indicate the level of self-efficacy: blue represents low, orange moderate, and green high self-efficacy levels.

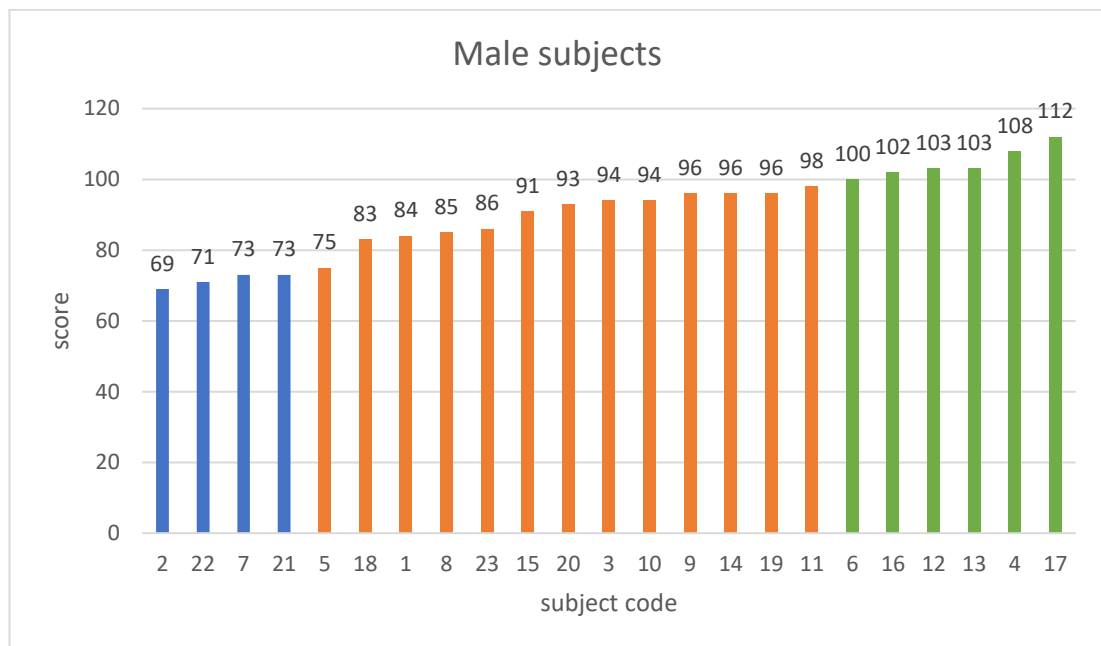


Figure 3 Writing self-efficacy scores by male subjects

In Figure 3, the scores that the male subjects (N=23) of the study obtained from the self-efficacy scale are presented. The number of the vertical axis represents the number of points scored from the scale and the horizontal axis shows the subjects' numbered code, the first one being M2. The scores of the male students ranged from 69 to 112 points and were 90.65 on average. The scores of the male students indicate that 4 (17.4%) of them show low, 13 (56.5%) moderate and 6 (26.1%) high level of self-efficacy. For male students, the median was 94, mode was 96, and standard deviation was 12.29.

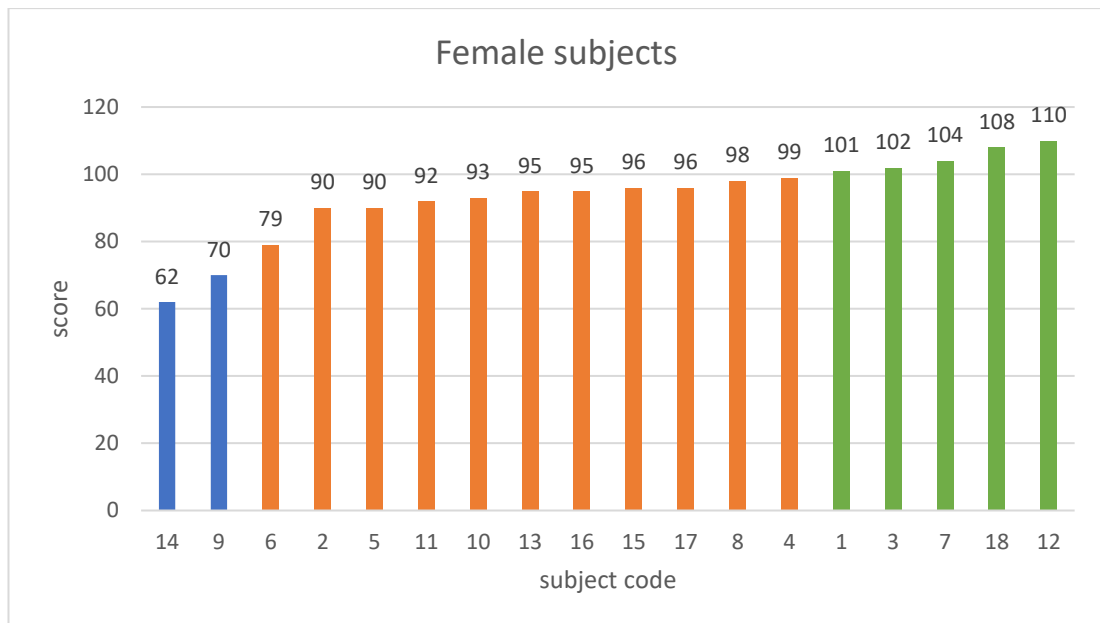


Figure 4 Writing self-efficacy scores by female subjects

Figure 4 presents the writing self-efficacy scores of the female subjects. Similar to Figure 3, the number of the vertical axis shows the number of points scored from the scale and the horizontal axis tells the subjects' numbered code. The scores of the female students ranged from 62 to 110 points. Two (11.1%) of the 18 female students scored less than 75 points and therefore show low level of self-efficacy, while 11 (61.1%) of them scored points indicating moderate and 5 (27.8%) high levels of self-efficacy. More than half (10/18 and 55.7%) of the female subjects scored 90-99 points from the scale, which makes the curve of the columns slightly less steep than that of Figure 3. The mean of their scores was 93.3 points. The mean is slightly higher than that of male students, but the difference is fairly small when the possible range of the points (25-125) is taken into account. For female students, the median was 95.5, mode was 90, and the standard deviation was 12.3. Out of the 5 subjects who scored the lowest number of points, 3 were male and 2 female subjects, whereas 3 female and 2 male subjects scored 5 of the highest number points. Overall, there does not seem to be a great difference in the total writing self-efficacy scores when comparing male and female subjects of the present study.

Next, SPSS was used to find out whether the difference between male and female subjects' self-efficacy scores is statistically significant. First, Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was used to find out whether the self-efficacy scores were normally distributed. Because the significance was found to be $p = 0.033$ which is < 0.05 , the

scores are not normally distributed. Consequently, an independent samples t-test cannot be used to find out whether there is a significant difference between the means of male and female subjects. Instead, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test was used. The result is significant if $p < 0.05$. The test revealed that there was no significant difference between the male and female subjects ($U = 180$, $p = 0.478$, $r = 0.013$). Therefore, it can be stated that the gender of the subject does not influence the writing self-efficacy score.

Two statements of the self-efficacy scale were selected for comparison by gender. These two statements were chosen for individual analysis because they represented two different types of aspects of language and writing, which also were mentioned multiple times in the subjects' answers to the open-ended question of the present study. The statements chosen for closer analysis are statement number 15 "I trust my ability to argument and justify my opinions" and 25 "I have confidence in correcting my own errors". Statement number 15 focuses on the content of the produced text, whereas statement number 25 has to do with error correction.

Even though quite a few subjects mentioned errors and incorrect spelling in their answers to the open-ended question, the mean score for statement number 25 was 3.44, which indicates moderate level of self-efficacy. The means of the scores of both male and female subjects were also calculated. The mean score of male subjects for the statement was 3.56, whereas female subjects scored 3.27 points on average for this statement. Different from the overall score, male subjects showed slightly higher level of self-efficacy for this individual statement on average.

The scale contained four items that measured the subjects' self-efficacy on errors and their correction, and the answers to these statements were mostly in line with each other. Around 85% of the subjects had chosen the same number or the one right next to it (e.g. 3 and 4) to answer all four statements. There were only 6 subjects whose answers showed larger discrepancies. Half of them had rated statement number 24 "I do not believe that errors in punctuation and grammar stop me from being a good writer" as *strongly agree* even though they were uncertain or disagreed with the other statements. This means that these subjects believe they can be considered good writers even though they make errors. Conversely, two of the 6 subjects disagreed with statement 24 although they showed high level of self-efficacy with the other three statements measuring errors and their correction, and therefore seem to believe that only error-free writers can be considered good.

Although argumentation skills are needed to write a good text despite language, finding the correct words and being able to produce full sentences in a foreign language to express those ideas is vital. This is why statement number 15 was chosen for closer analysis. The mean score of all subjects for this statement was 3.85, which shows moderate self-efficacy. The mean score of female subjects also indicated moderate level with a score of 3.67, while male subjects scored 4.00 on average and therefore showed high level of self-efficacy for expressing opinions. For mean scores of all 25 statements, see Appendix 2. Looking at the table it can be seen that the female subjects scored higher mean score for 16 (64%) statements. The statements for which male subjects scored higher mean score handled error correction, argumentation and creative use of words.

4.3 Writing Task Scores

In this section, the scores the subjects have obtained from the writing task are presented and contrasted with their individual self-efficacy scores. The scores of the writing self-efficacy scale and the scores of the writing task are compared in order to find out whether the subjects were able to judge their self-efficacy realistically. The goal of the section is also to answer research question number two “do the subjects’ self-efficacy beliefs and performance correlate?” and find out whether the results of the present study support Bandura’s theory. Results by gender are also presented in order to find out whether there are differences between male and female subjects. The scores obtained from the writing self-efficacy questionnaire become more meaningful when they are analysed in relation to the subjects’ actual performance in the writing task. To some extent, it is possible to judge someone’s level of self-efficacy based only on their answers to the questionnaire. However, by comparing them in relation to performance, possible correlations can be statistically analysed.

4.3.1 Overview of the Writing Task Scores

As noted in the Methodology Section, the business messages were scored by the teacher of the course, who is a lecturer in English and business communication. The maximum score for the business message was 20 points, and the subjects needed to score at least 10 points to pass. It was also possible to score half points, which can be

seen from Table 1. The evaluation criteria were heavily focused on vocabulary, especially specific business terminology, which was worth 12 points. Other evaluation criteria included accuracy (3p), structure (2p), tone & style (2p), and layout (1p), which make a total of 20 points. Since the evaluation of the essays was heavily based on the use of correct business terminology, it can be seen as a limitation of the present study. If the weight of the criteria would have been more even, the results might have been different. There were no big differences in the length of the business messages. One (M7) of the 41 subjects of the present study did not write the business message, which is why his score on the self-efficacy scale will no longer be taken into account when self-efficacy and performance are compared.

Table 1 Business message writing scores

Score	Number of subjects (N=40)
<10 = fail	2
10-11.5 = 1	3
12-13.5 = 2	5
14-16.5 = 3	17
17-18.5 = 4	11
19-20 = 5	2

The business message writing scores are presented in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, two subjects (M3 and M13) scored less than 10 points and therefore failed the writing task. The highest number of points were credited to two female subjects (F4 and F5), who both scored 19 points for their texts. In addition to the two failed attempts, one subject (F9) scored 10 points, which is the lowest number of points worth a pass. Overall, the subjects performed well in the task. 75% (N=30) of the subjects scored points worth of grade 3 or better, which indicates good and excellent levels of writing skills. The mean of the scores is 15.2, median 15.5, mode 17, and standard deviation is 2.545. Next, scores are presented by gender.

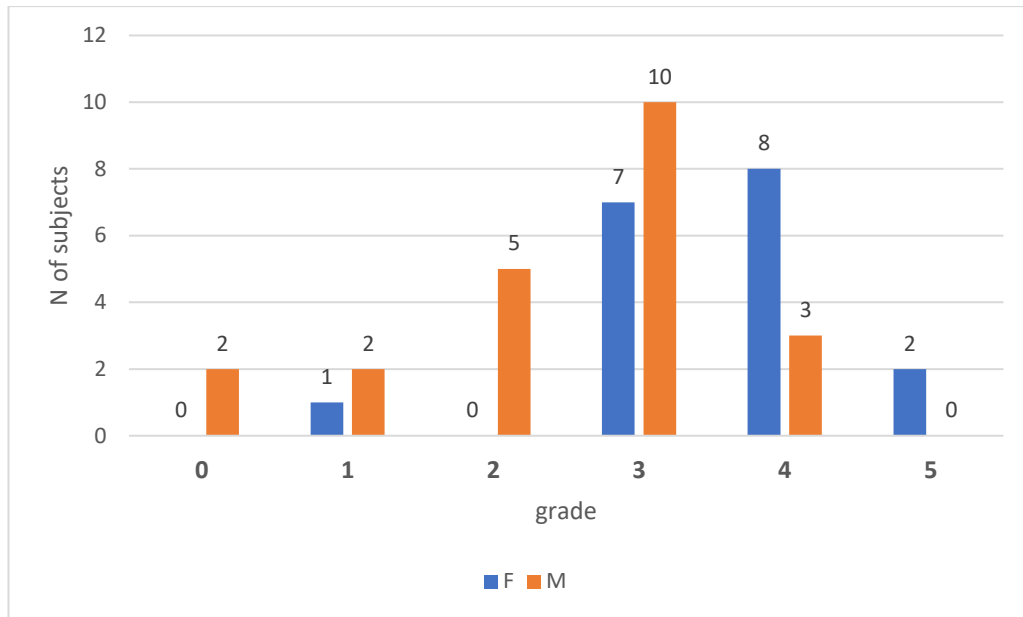


Figure 5 Writing task scores by gender

As can be seen from Figure 5 by looking at the blue columns, female subjects of the present study performed better than the male subjects. For male subjects, the mean of the scores is 14.2 points, median is 14.5, mode is 13.5, and standard deviation is 2.384. The mean score is 16.3 points for female subjects, median is 17.0, and there are two modes, 14.5 and 17. The standard deviation is 2.288. Similar to the self-efficacy scale scores, the differences are not drastic, but notable.

Table 2 Subjects with the lowest and highest self-efficacy and their performance

Subject code	Self-efficacy scale score	Writing task score
F14	62	18
M2	69	10.5
F9	70	10
M22	71	17
M21	73	13.5
F7	104	15.5
F18	108	17
M4	108	17.5
F12	110	17
M17	112	15

In Table 2, the subjects who scored the 5 highest and lowest points from the self-efficacy scale are presented in comparison to their actual performance in the writing task. What can be seen from the table is the fact that two of the subjects (F14 and M22) who scored quite low on the self-efficacy scale actually performed very well in the task. The other subjects seem to have been able to judge their self-efficacy quite realistically. By looking at the self-efficacy scale scores in relation to the subjects' performance, it can be noted that self-efficacy scores and actual performance do not always match. Since previous studies have resulted in similar findings, researchers have worked to find out the reasons behind these differences. Even though the primary aim of the present study was not analyse the reasons behind the possible mismatch between beliefs and actual performance, mentioning a few possible explanations which may also apply to the subjects of the present study is reasonable. Some possible reasons and contrasts to earlier studies are presented later in the Discussion section.

4.3.2 Comparing the Performance of Male and Female Subjects

The performance of the subjects can be examined by looking at their writing scores and calculating the measures of central tendencies, but for deeper quantitative analysis, it is advisable to use statistical tools. Thus, SPSS is next used to examine the relationship between the variables, and to determine whether the relationship between gender and performance is statistically significant. An independent-samples t-test can be used to measure the significance. The test revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the scores of male ($M = 14.23$, $SD = 2.384$) and female ($M = 16.33$, $SD = 2.288$) subjects ($t = -2.830$, $df = 38$, $p = 0.007$). Therefore, based on this result, gender seems to have an effect on performance.

Next, SPSS was used to find out possible correlation between self-efficacy scores and writing performance. Since both are metric variables, the Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the two variables. The results revealed that there is no correlation between self-efficacy scores and writing task performance ($r = 0.253$, $n = 40$, $p = 0.115$). The correlation coefficient of 0.253 indicates that there is a weak linear relationship between the variables. A scatterplot offers a visual representation of the results.

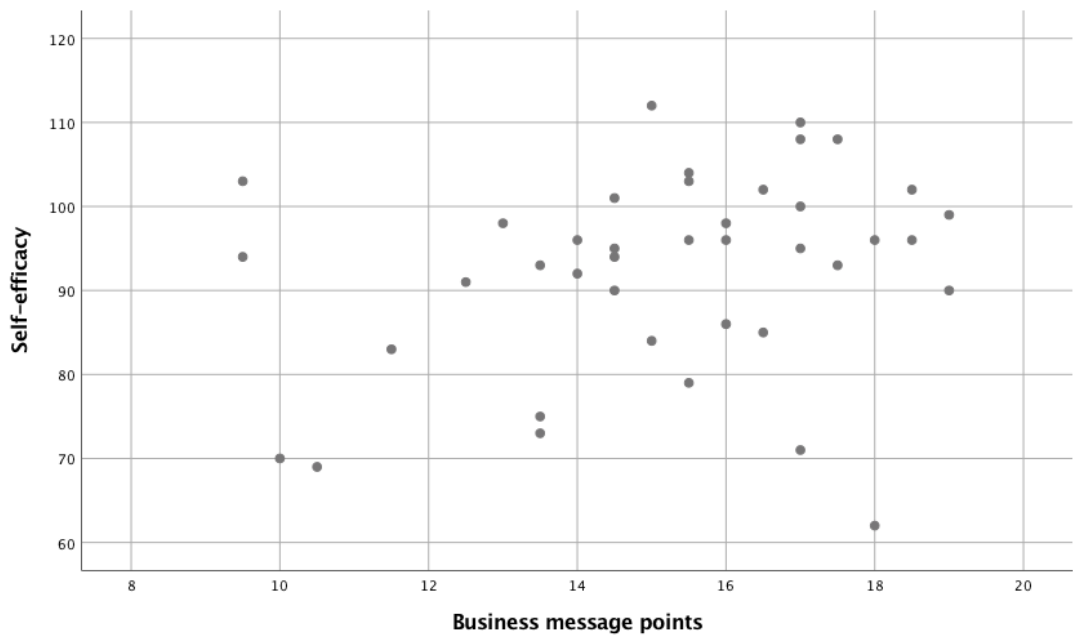


Figure 6 Scatterplot of the subjects' self-efficacy scores and business message points

By looking at the scatterplot of the results, the association between the two variables can be seen to have a weak linear trend. The points appear as a scattered field with only a little indication of a linear relationship. There are also a few clear outliers.

Similar tests of correlation were done for male and female subjects separately. First, the Pearson correlation for self-efficacy and performance was assessed to male subjects. The calculations revealed that there is no correlation between the variables ($r = 0.194$, $n = 22$, $p = 0.386$). For female subjects, the same values are ($r = 0.305$, $N = 18$, $p = 0.218$), which also signify that there is no correlation between the self-efficacy score and writing performance. Appendix 3 provides a visual demonstration of the results for both male and female subjects. As can be seen, both figures reveal a scattered field of points, and even though both of the figures show a weak linear relationship between the variables, a few clear outliers can also be found.

5 Discussion

This section focuses on discussing how the results of the study answer the earlier presented research questions, and whether these findings support the results of earlier studies on similar topics. The different parts of the study will be discussed in the same order as the results were presented, starting with the qualitative aspect of the study and then moving on to the quantitative part. Similar to Results section, the male and female subjects are compared throughout the section.

5.1 Qualitative research

The purpose of the first research question was to study how the subjects see themselves as writers of English, and also to calculate how high self-efficacy levels they report. The qualitative analysis was based on the subjects' self-reports of earlier success, their English skills, and the short descriptions they wrote about themselves as writers of English. Most of the subjects' evaluations of their skills and earlier success matched. However, it is not sure whether the subjects based their answers on the grades they have attained at school, meaning that for example those who reported grades 8-9 automatically chose the option "good", or if they evaluated their skills more subjectively. However, the purpose of these background questions was not merely to collect more data but also to ease the subjects into answering the rest of the questionnaire. The writer descriptions, the content of which was already partly discussed under section 4.1.2, also gave the subjects a chance to think and describe their feelings about writing before they answered the main part of the questionnaire, the writing self-efficacy scale. Comparing the subjects' writer descriptions to earlier studies is difficult, since most of earlier writing self-efficacy studies focus only on the quantitative aspect. However, Oksanen (2006) has studied how Finnish students view themselves as users of Finnish, Swedish and English in her thesis. Instead of using regular writer descriptions, Oksanen (2005) studied the topic through an analysis of metaphorical constructions. She found out that the subjects trusted their English writing skills more than their speaking skills, and that female subjects wrote about themselves more critically than the male subjects. Out of the 18 female subjects of the present study, 5 subjects used a negative or critical tone in their answers, whereas only 3 male subjects were purely critical of their own skills. However, a large number of the answers included both positive and negative remarks, and neither of the genders

can be said to clearly have been more critical. Overall, male and female subjects' answers to the open-ended question did not differ drastically, and there were more differences when studying the descriptions on an individual level. As could be expected, many of the subjects mirrored their skills and qualities as English writers in relation to similar aspects which are often evaluated at school, mostly related to the knowledge of different aspects of language, such as vocabulary and grammar.

When comparing the subjects' answers to the open-ended question and their scores in the writing self-efficacy scale, discrepancies could be found. Even though the tone of some of the answers was positive and suggested that the subject had trust in one's abilities as a writer, the value scored on the scale and the description did not always support each other. For instance, two female subjects showed high writing self-efficacy in their answers to the open-ended question. F5 described herself being "quite sure of myself, because my prior knowledge (of English) is good" and F15 wrote that she is "lexically, structurally and contentwise versatile and expressive. Challenges mainly in spelling". They both had stated their skill level in English to be excellent, and they reported that their earlier success in English at school had been 10 on average. However, both of these subjects showed only moderate self-efficacy when answering the writing self-efficacy scale, which is further discussed in the next section 7.2. On the contrary, subject M5 described himself quite positively, describing himself as "quite good. I have a good vocabulary, but it could be even more extensive". By comparing his answer and the score from the self-efficacy scale, which was right on the border of low and moderate, a clear discrepancy can be found. However, his earlier success at school was reported to have been 7, and he considered his skills to be on a satisfactory level.

Most important findings were the discrepancies and also, on the other hand, realistic evaluations of own abilities. For instance, subject F14 who scored the lowest points on the scale (62/120) and wrote that she struggles with writing the most scored excellent points (18/20) on the writing task. Similarly, M22 who portrayed low writing self-efficacy, scoring 71 points on the scale and describing himself "comparatively poor" reported earlier success at school to have been excellent, and scored 17 points on the business message. There were also individuals who overestimated their abilities, such as M11, who scored 98 points from the self-efficacy scale, and yet scored 13 points for his business message. He had described himself "efficacious and good enough". Even though some of the subjects over- and underestimated their abilities,

most of the subjects were able to match their efficacy judgements and actual performance. Uncertainty of the subjects showed in writer descriptions and in their answers to the statements, which is common when judging self-efficacy (Stone 1993, 2).

5.2 Quantitative research

The quantitative aspect related to the first research question was to find out how high writing self-efficacy levels the subjects have. The results obtained from the writing self-efficacy scale indicate that more than half (59%) of the subjects of the present study have a moderate level of writing self-efficacy. This result matches the earlier evaluation of skill level, when 56.1% of the subjects considered their English skills to be on a good level. The finding is also in line with the writer descriptions, most of which included signs of uncertainty beside positive and negative remarks. It is not surprising that although many of the subjects reported themselves to be good or even excellent in English and successful at school, evaluating their skills in relation to a new type of task can result in uncertainty about their abilities. In spite of this, almost fourth (24.4%) of the students showed a high level of writing self-efficacy in their answers. On the other hand, 17% of them were classed as having low writing self-efficacy for English writing.

Even though the present study did not seek to find out the reasons for differing self-efficacy levels, for instance Schunk (1989, 176) has reasoned that one reason for differing expectations for future performance is a result of the fact that students attribute past experiences differently. If they attribute earlier poor performance to ability, they tend to have lower self-efficacy beliefs for future tasks. On the other hand, those students who explain poor performance with unstable factors, such poor preparation, tend to have higher self-efficacy levels for success. Even though none of the subjects rated their English skills to be weak, it is natural that even in a sample this small, the differences in the skill levels of the subjects can be substantial, and if they are able to accurately evaluate themselves, the differences in self-efficacy levels will be equally prominent.

In addition to individual differences, gender differences are common particularly regarding writing self-efficacy and performance (Hansen 2009). It was hypothesised that female subjects would be more likely to critically judge their abilities to perform

well in the writing task. Somewhat surprisingly, it was found that the mean scores of the male subjects of the present study indicated slightly lower level of self-efficacy than the female subjects. Because the writing self-efficacy scores were not normally distributed, Mann-Whitney U Test was used to calculate the significance of the difference. Despite female subjects scoring higher points on average, the difference was not found to be significant ($p = 0.478$), similar to the study of Villalón, Mateos and Cuevas (2013). Although the difference was not statistically significant, seeing female subjects report high self-efficacy was contrary to some previous research on the subject (Pajares and Johnson 1996; Kirmizi and Kirmizi, 2015). These results of the present study differ also from the findings of Pajares and Valiante (1997), whose study comparing fifth-grade boys and girls to ninth graders suggested a downward trend for girls' beliefs of their academic performance as they got older. The older girls reported lower levels of self-efficacy in comparison to the boys, even though there was no difference in their performance. However, as Williams and Takaku (2011) explain, some previous studies on the matter have shown that differences in writing self-efficacy between genders decline over time. Similar to the present study, they note that upon university these differences have mostly disappeared. Similar to the present study, Hashemnejad, Zoghi and Amini (2014) studied the relationship between writing self-efficacy and performance of EFL students in a university setting. An independent samples t-test was assessed to reveal whether there is a difference between the writing self-efficacy of male and female students, but no statistically significant results were found. However, also similar to the present study, the female subjects scored slightly higher number of points from the scale in comparison to the male subjects. A possible reason for the difference has been suggested by Pajares and Valiante (2006), who suggest that the higher female self-efficacy might be related to the stereotypical view of writing being a female domain.

Pajares and Johnson (1996) have expressed their concern over their finding of girls being as capable as boys, but nevertheless reporting lower writing self-efficacy. They wonder "why this difference in self-beliefs should exist in the face of equal capability and performance". Similar findings have been reported by Pajares (2002) and Wigfield, Eccles and Pintrich (1996), who suggested that female subjects are often more modest in their answers in comparison to boys, and it might be related to the tendency of males and females to respond to the self-efficacy questionnaires differently. However, these notions do not seem to apply to the female subjects of the

present study, who received higher scores in comparison to the male subjects for both self-efficacy and performance. Although the results are not generalisable due to the small sample size, being able to see the female subjects trusting their capability in comparison to some previous studies is a positive remark.

For instance Pajares (2002) has noted that when the students with similar levels of self-efficacy at the same level of academic competence have been studied in relation to their skills, girls have often outperformed boys in writing skills. This applies to the findings of the present study, which found a statistically significant ($p = 0.007$) difference between male and female writing scores, although the difference between their self-efficacy scores was not significant. All in all, the subjects performed well, scoring 15.2 points out of 20 on average. The high mean score shows that on average, the subjects have been able to use appropriate business terminology well, especially considering that for the most of them this was their first English course since starting their studies at the university. Finally, correlation analysis revealed that there was no correlation between the self-efficacy scores and performance, which is against the common view of how self-efficacy affects performance.

Wigfield, Eccles and Pintrich (1996) reported that in studies in which the two genders had similar levels of self-efficacy belief, the girls outperformed the boys on writing tasks. This notion seems to also be true for the subjects of the present study. For example, 9 female and 8 male subjects scored 90-99 points from the writing self-efficacy scale, which indicates moderate self-efficacy. The mean scores from the business message were 17.1 points for those 9 female subjects, but only 13.5 for the male subjects. This example clearly shows that even if the subjects reported similar self-efficacy beliefs, their performance does not always correlate with it. This may be due to the earlier mentioned tendency to answer questionnaires modestly, or purely the fact that some subjects felt uncertain about a new type of writing task. However, having some doubt about own abilities may encourage the individual to exert more effort into task completion, which can result in better performance (Salomon, 1984). Conversely, having a great amount of trust in own abilities might result in poor performance. Stone (1993, 4) explains that individuals who lack first-hand task experience, which most of the subjects of the present study likely do, are more likely to reflect overconfidence in their self-efficacy judgements. These are some of the notions, which could partly explain why subjects' writing self-efficacy scores and performance do not always match.

5.3 Limitations of the present study and recommendations for future

The previous subsections discussed the study in relation to the research questions and earlier findings. Next, it is essential to identify the limitations of the present study, understand why studying the topic was seen important, and what could be done in the future.

When judging the reliability of the present study, some factors have to be taken into account. Similar to any other study that is based on human judgement, it has to be noted that there are factors which affect the way individuals respond to a questionnaire or a scale. The same person may rate statements differently depending on current mood or even time of day. Therefore, even though other researchers would be able to replicate the present study, the answers of the subjects might differ from how they answered earlier. However, as explained in the Methodology section, Prickel's (1994) writing self-efficacy scale has been found to be a reliable instrument in FL context (Setyowati, 2016). Also, Prickel (1994) himself established the scale's reliability and validity in his dissertation. Also, to improve the reliability of self-report measures, the scale and questionnaire were translated, and any ambiguous statements and words were clarified to the subjects. The business message scores can also be treated as reliable data, because an experienced teacher graded them. In addition, the reliability of the present study could have been increased by asking the subjects to write multiple texts and seeing whether their performance varied. These business messages could have been graded by using different evaluation criteria, which would not have been as heavily focused on terminology, and which could have made the evaluation of the subjects' writing skills more accurate. However, since self-efficacy is extremely task-specific, the subjects would have been required to write several business messages. Consequently, writing multiple similar type of texts in a short period of time could have resulted in de-motivation, which might have negatively affected their performance. In addition, this would have resulted in extra work for the teacher of the course, since grading the texts reliably and following the same evaluation criteria would have been needed.

Limitations concerning both internal and external validity are quite common in self-efficacy studies. Since there are multiple factors that affect self-efficacy, and which are outside the control of the researcher, it is challenging to study the cause and effect relationship of for instance writing self-efficacy and performance. However, this

problem has been taken into account throughout the present study by for example choosing and modifying an existing writing self-efficacy scale in order to be sure that the scale measures what it is supposed to measure as accurately as possible. When considering the external validity of the study, the results cannot be generalised outside the study population. The findings, even though somewhat similar to earlier similar studies, can be applied to only the situation, people, and time of the present study. However, the more self-efficacy studies are carried out in different settings, the better we are able to understand it. Therefore, similar studies in different academic context and age groups are recommended.

In addition, it is important to remember that even though the role of self-efficacy on performance has been studied and acknowledged, it is not the only factor that influences our behaviour. Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory is based on the notion that human behaviour is an interplay of different determinants which affect individuals' agency. Consequently, self-efficacy beliefs influence our performance together with other factors, such as outcome expectations, which can result in individuals behaving in ways that do not match their self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, the role of self-efficacy and other factors which influence our behaviour in a given context is not straightforward. For instance, a subject with low self-efficacy for writing can perform better than expected if he or she perceives the task valuable and having potential rewards, such as a high course grade. Thus, when looking at the results of the present study and many similar studies, it is important to understand that it is possible, and quite likely, that the self-efficacy beliefs of the subjects are not the only factor which influence performance. Despite these limitations, the study succeeded to answer the research questions, and also revealed a positive occurrence of female subjects portraying higher capability beliefs in contrast to many earlier studies.

In spite of the existing evidence of the effects of positive self-efficacy beliefs on performance, the topic has not been studied enough in diverse contexts and cultures. Findings of the present study offer a basis for exploring how Finnish university students evaluate themselves as writers of English, and how these writing beliefs influence their performance. By looking at their answers, it is possible to get a glimpse of the areas of writing the subjects find the most challenging, and how they define themselves as writers of a foreign language. By continuing to study people of different ages and backgrounds, we can gather valuable information about the effects of self-

efficacy, and hopefully learn to support the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs both in school and at home.

6 Conclusion

Self-efficacy beliefs influence how much effort, persistence, and energy people are willing to exert in task completion. This study aimed to find out what first-year university students think of themselves as writers of English, how high their level of writing self-efficacy is, and whether their self-efficacy beliefs correlate with their performance in a writing task. According to Bandura (1997), peoples' beliefs of their capabilities heavily influence their performance. Self-efficacy beliefs influence individuals' behaviour, and therefore it is beneficial to know and be aware of the notion. The better we understand the concept, the more we are able to support the development of positive capability beliefs. The concept of self-efficacy has been of interest for many researchers across disciplines, but it has not been widely studied in Finland, which is why studying it in a university environment seemed needed. However, similar studies have been carried out in other countries, which offered a basis for comparison.

In order to evaluate the subjects' self-efficacy, a modified version of Prickel's (1994) writing self-efficacy scale was assessed to a group of university students. Both qualitative analysis and statistical tools were used to find out possible correlation between the self-efficacy levels of the subjects to their actual performance. In addition, throughout the study, male and female subjects were compared in order to find out whether gender has an effect on either self-efficacy or performance.

More than half (59%) of the 41 subjects portrayed a moderate level of writing self-efficacy. This finding was in line with their writer descriptions, because most of the subjects wrote comments containing both positive and negative aspect of their writing skills, meaning that they were uncertain about at least some aspects of writing. The difference between male and female subjects' self-efficacy scores was not found to be statistically significant, despite females scoring slightly higher scores on average. However, the study found a significant difference between the performance of the genders, indicating that females were better business message writers. Finally, correlation analysis revealed that there was no correlation between the self-efficacy scores and performance, which is against the common view of how self-efficacy affects performance.

One limitation of the present study was the relatively small number of subjects, which is why the results are not generalizable outside the study group. However, one

reason for deciding to study a smaller number of subjects was the will to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the study. Therefore, taking account the scope of the study, limiting the number of subjects was necessary. Another limitation of the present study, similar to other self-efficacy studies, is the problem of measuring self-efficacy levels of people as they are not directly observable. However, this was taken into account when choosing both the subjects and the scale for the present study, by using a modified version of an existing writing self-efficacy scale created by a professional in the field, and by assessing it to a group of university students who are able to evaluate themselves more reliably than children.

As mentioned earlier, a great number of earlier research on self-efficacy in academic environment has been conducted in the United States (Schunk and Pajares 2009, 48), which is why conducting similar studies in other countries and cultures can broaden our understanding of the effects of self-efficacy. Studies on other aspects of language and self-efficacy are also recommended, even though writing was selected as the topic of the present study for its role as an interesting productive activity. In the future, it would be interesting to see more longitudinal studies examining how writing self-efficacy beliefs develop as the subjects grow older, and whether male and female subjects differ in this respect.

Even less is known, however, about for example how reading habits influence writing self-efficacy. Although Finnish children are among the world's best readers, there are some worrying trends in reading performance (PIRLS, 2016). Alarming news have revealed that young people read less and even though they are able to read in the sense of the word, they have a difficulty in understanding the content of the texts. By skimming the text, or screen, the reader is able to identify the main points of the text. However, reading skills will not develop further if longer texts are avoided. This negative development in receptive skills will certainly affect the individual's productive skills, which is why the topic deserves more attention in the years to come.

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Appendix 1

Dear student,

You are answering to a questionnaire that is part of a research which is used to examine university students' perceptions of themselves as writers of English. Please answer all the items according to how you feel. The person conducting the study is the only person who can see the answer sheets with your names. The teacher of the course does not see the answers and your answers do not affect the grading of the course.

I give my permission to use this questionnaire and the number of points awarded for the business message in this study (check) _____

Basic information

1. Name*: _____

*will be later modified into an unrecognisable code

2. Gender (check): ____ male ____ female

3. Age: _____

4. I began my university studies in (year): _____

5. Earlier success in English at school on average (4-10): _____

6. My skill level in English (circle): Excellent Good Satisfactory Weak

7. Using a few words, describe yourself as a writer of English:

Answer to the statements on a scale from 1 to 5. Check the box which best describes your feelings.

1 – strongly disagree; I never feel like this

2 - disagree; I do not often feel like this

3 - unsure; I sometimes feel like this

4 - agree; I mostly feel like this

5 – strongly agree; I always feel like this

*In this questionnaire, essay refers to the business message.

	1 strongly disagree	2 disagree	3 unsure	4 agree	5 strongly agree
1. I am confident that my writing is understood by those who read it.					
2. When writing, I am confident that I can think of words to express my ideas.					
3. I am a confident essay* writer.					
4. When I write, I can give reasons for my views.					
5. I believe that I am capable of writing good essays.					
6. When writing, I trust that I can produce content good content.					
7. When I write, I believe I can produce a text that matches the topic.					
8. I do not have difficulty in writing a good beginning sentence.					
9. I believe in my skills to organise ideas.					
10. I believe that I am able to clearly state the main idea when I write a text or a paragraph.					
11. I am confident that my examples and facts support my written idea.					
12. When I write, I have confidence in ending it with a clear statement.					
13. When I write, I believe that I am able to find the correct words to express my ideas.					

	1 strongly disagree	2 disagree	3 unsure	4 agree	5 strongly agree
14. I am confident in making sentences relate to each other.					
15. I trust my ability to argument and justify my opinions.					
16. I am confident that I am a good writer.					
17. I trust that I am able to alter my style of writing to match the situation and topic.					
18. I have confidence that I can write texts that express my ideas.					
19. I have confidence in organising my words and ideas.					
20. I believe I can use my time efficiently when writing.					
21. I believe that I am able to use words in a diverse and creative fashion.					
22. I am confident in finding my own writing errors.		.	.	.	
23. When I revise my paragraphs, I am confident in finding my spelling and punctuation errors.		.	.	.	
24. I do not believe that errors in punctuation and grammar stop me from being a good writer.		.	.	.	
25. I have confidence in correcting my own errors.		.	.		

Thank you for your answers!

Appendix 2

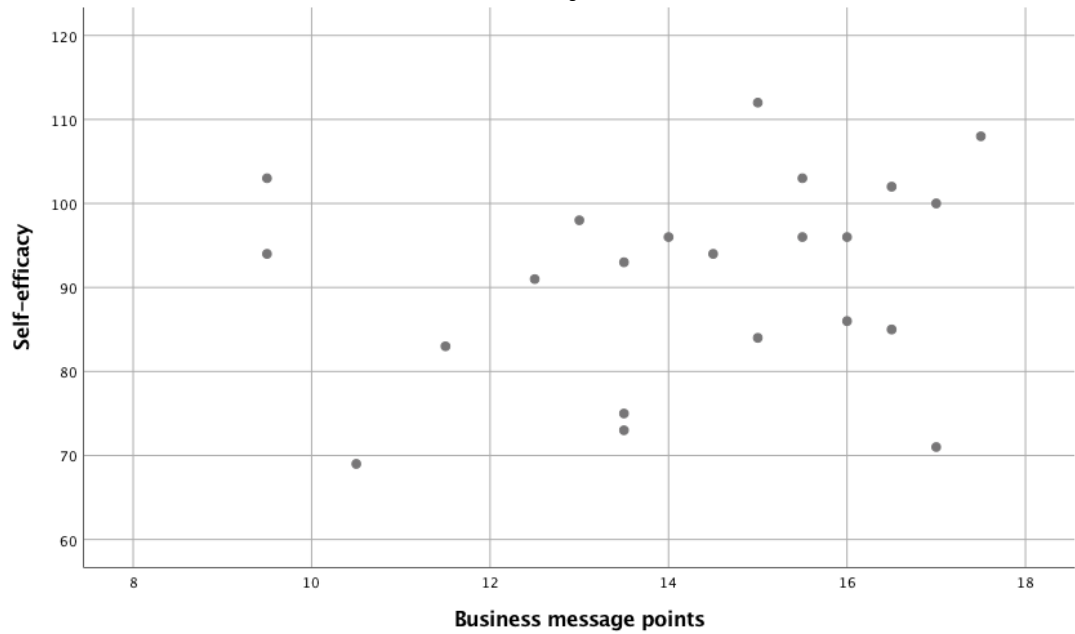
Writing self-efficacy scale statements' total mean scores and mean scores by gender

Statement	Mean (N=41)	Mean M (N=23)	Mean F (N=18)
1	4.61	4.61	4.61
2	3.78	3.78	3.78
3	3.41	3.39	3.44
4	3.88	3.83	3.94
5	3.54	3.48	3.61
6	3.80	3.61	4.01
7	3.98	3.78	4.22
8	3.71	3.70	3.72
9	3.68	3.41	4.00
10	3.66	3.61	3.72
11	3.88	3.83	3.94
12	3.63	3.57	3.72
13	3.59	3.61	3.56
14	3.71	3.57	3.89
15	3.85	4.00	3.67
16	3.61	3.57	3.67
17	3.73	3.65	3.83
18	4.00	3.96	4.06
19	3.93	3.96	3.89
20	3.37	3.30	3.44
21	3.37	3.39	3.33
22	3.37	3.52	3.17
23	3.17	3.26	3.06
24	3.34	3.39	3.28
25	3.44	3.57	3.28

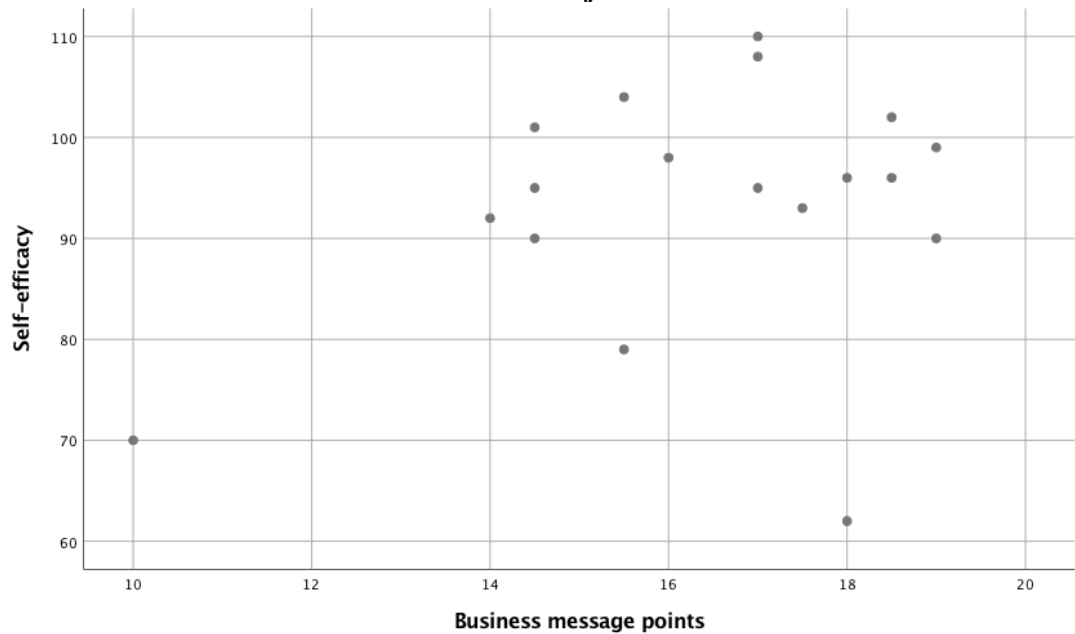
Appendix 3

Scatterplots of the relationship between self-efficacy score and writing performance

Male subjects



Female subjects



Appendix 4 Finnish summary

Tiivistelmä

Johdanto

Albert Banduran sosio-kognitiivisen teorian yksi ihmisen ajattelua ja toimintaa selittävä käsite on minäpystyvyys (engl. self-efficacy), joka tarkoittaa yksilön käsityksiä omasta kyvystään suoriutua erilaisista tehtävistä. Usko omaan kykyihin voi olla joko heikkoa, kohtalaista tai hyvää sen mukaan, kuinka hyvin yksilö uskoo suoristuvansa esimerkiksi vieraan kielen kirjoitustehtävästä. Uskomukset omista mahdollisuuksistaan vaikuttavat voimakkaasti siihen, miten paljon ihminen on valmis käyttämään aikaa ja vaivaa tehtävän parissa. Usein heikko minäpystyvyys johtaa tehtävän välttelyyn, kun taas vahva usko onnistumiseen saa yksilön ponnistelemaan onnistumisen eteen.

Minäpystyvyyden vaikutus suoriutumiseen on kiinnostanut tutkijoita käsitteen syntyajoista lähtien, ja aihetta on tutkittu ympäri maailmaa. Osa tutkijoista on ollut huolissaan tutkimuksen keskittymisestä Yhdysvaltoihin, ja he ovat ilmaisseet tarpeen aiheen tutkimiselle erilaisissa ympäristöissä ja tilanteissa, jotta käsitys minäpystyvyyden vaikutuksista laajenisi ja tarkentuisi. Tutkielman aihe määrittyikin pitkälti halusta tutkia aihetta, joka on herättänyt maailmalla kiinnostusta, mutta jota on tutkittu Suomessa vielä verrattain vähän.

Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, millaisia käsityksiä opiskelijoilla on itsestään englannin kirjoittajina, millä tasolla heidän kirjoittajaminäpystyvyytensä on, ja korreloiko minäpystyvyys kirjoitustehtävästä suoriutumisen kanssa. Koko tutkimuksen ajan mies- ja naisopiskelijoiden vastauksia ja tuloksia vertaillaan sukupuolten mahdollisten eroavaisuuksien selvittämiseksi. Näitä aiheita lähestytään kolmen tutkimuskysymyksen kautta, mitkä ovat:

- 1) Minkälaisia käsityksiä opiskelijoilla on itsestään englannin kirjoittajina, ja millä tasolla heidän minäpystyvyytensä on?
- 2) Onko minäpystyvyyden ja suoriutumisen välillä korrelaatiota?
- 3) Mitä eroja havaitaan, kun verrataan mies- ja naisopiskelijoiden kirjoittajakuvauksia, minäpystyvyyttä ja kirjoitustehtävästä suoriutumista?

Suurin osa samankaltaisista tutkimuksista on laadultaan määrällisiä. Tämä tutkimus yhdistää suurilta osin määrälliseen tutkimukseen myös laadullisia elementtejä, jotta opiskelijoiden minäpystyvyydestä saadaan tarkempi kuva – unohtamatta aiheen yksilöllistä luonnetta. Laadullinen osa toteutettiin tyypittelemällä opiskelijoiden kirjoittajakuvauksia, kun taas määrälliseen tutkimukseen käytettiin tilastotyökaluja. Tarkemmin tutkimuksessa käytettyjä metodeita kuvataan tiivistelmän kolmannessa kappaleessa ”Aineisto ja metodit”.

Teoriatausta

Ihmisen toimintaa selittävä sosio-kognitiivinen teoria korostaa yksilön uskomusten ja ajatusten vaikutusta tekoihin. Yksi tärkeä yksilön ajattelua ja toimintaa selittävä käsite on minäpystyvyys, jonka Bandura esitteli ensimmäisen kerran vuonna 1977. Minäpystyvyys tarkoittaa yksilön käsityksiä omasta osaamisestaan ja kyvystä suoriutua erilaisista tehtävistä. Minäpystyvyys on erittäin tehtäväkohtaista, jolloin onkin tärkeää varmistaa, että minäpystyvyyttä arvioiva henkilö tuntee tehtävän ja sen vaatimukset hyvin. Kun minäpystyvyyttä halutaan mitata, tulee mittariston tai muun arviointitavan keskittyä tietyn tyyppiseen tehtävään. Banduran mukaan juuri minäpystyvyyden tehtävä- ja tilannekohtaisuus erottaa sen esimerkiksi itseluottamuksesta. Tämä tarkoittaa sitä, että yksilön minäpystyvyys ei ole joko hyvä tai huono, vaan sen taso vaihtelee tilanteen ja tehtävän mukaan. Myös esimerkiksi oppiaineen sisällä opiskelijalla voi olla hyvin erilaisia käsityksiä itsestään tehtävästä riippuen – fiktiivisen tarinan kirjoittaminen saattaa tuntua helpolta, mutta mielipidekirjoituksen kirjoittaminen tuntuu haastavalta. Minäpystyvyys ei myöskään ole pysyvä ominaisuus, vaan se voi ajan kuluessa joko heikentyä tai vahvistua.

Voimakkaimmin minäpystyvyyden kehittymiseen vaikuttavat Banduran mukaan yksilön aiemmat onnistumiset eli tilanteiden hallinnan kokemukset (engl. mastery experiences), sillä ne perustuvat yksilön omiin kokemuksiin. Aiemmat onnistumiset samankaltaisissa tehtävissä lisäävät yksilön uskoa uusiin onnistumisiin, kun taas epäonnistumiset laskevat minäpystyvyyttä. Myös mallit eli toisten henkilöiden onnistumiset (engl. vicarious experiences) vaikuttavat siihen, millaisia odotuksia yksilö asettaa itselleen. Varsinkin yksilön itsensä kanssa samankaltaisen ihmisen, esimerkiksi luokkatoverin, onnistuminen tehtävässä voi lisätä minäpystyvyyden tunnetta. Kolmas osatekijä minäpystyvyyden kehityksessä on sosiaalinen tuki ja kannustus (engl. social persuasion). Sen vaikutus on voimakkainta

tilanteissa, jossa kannustus tulee henkilöltä, jota vastaanottaja pitää luotettavana ja joka itse hallitsee tehtävän. Pelkillä kehuilla minäpystyvyys ei kuitenkaan parane, varsinkaan jos yksilö kokee epäonnistumisia kannustuksesta huolimatta. Fysiologisia tekijöitä on suomeksi kuvattu tunnevireenä (engl. emotional arousal), joka viittaa stressaavien tilanteiden herättämiin tuntemuksiin. Pelottavan tilanteen aiheuttama tunnevire vaikuttaa minäpystyvyyteen laskevasti ja heikentää suorituskyykyä, kun taas rauhallinen olotila kehossa viestii luottamuksesta omiin kykyihin.

Aiemmat tutkimukset aiheesta ovat osoittaneet, että yksilön käsitykset hänen omista kyvyistään ja taidoistaan vaikuttavat suoriutumiseen kognitiivisten taitojen lisäksi. Pelkkä luottamus omiin taitoihin ei kuitenkaan riitä, mikäli tarvittava taito tehtävästä suoriutumiseen puuttuu. Hyvä minäpystyvyys vaikuttaa kuitenkin yksilön vaivannäköön ja ahkeruuteen positiivisesti niin, että todennäköisyydet hyvään suoritukseen paranevat. On myös tärkeää huomata, että vaikka heikko minäpystyvyys liitetään usein heikkoon suoriutumiseen, vaikutus ei aina ole yhtä suoraviivainen. On huomattu, että pieni epävarmuus omista kyvyistä voi saada yksilön yrittämään kovemmin ja käyttämään enemmän aikaa tehtävän parissa, mikä saattaa vaikuttaa suoritukseen positiivisesti.

Koska kirjoittaminen on monivaiheinen ja vaativa produktiivinen taito, se on kiinnostanut minäpystyvyydestä tutkijoita ympäri maailmaa. Tulokset eivät kuitenkaan ole aina olleet yhdenmukaisia. Monet ovat löytäneet tilastollisesti merkittäviä tuloksia minäpystyvyyden tason ja tehtävästä suoriutumisen välillä, ja sukupuolten väliset erot ovat myös nousseet esille. Monien tutkimusten mukaan tytöillä on tapana aliarvioida omaa minäpystyvyyttään, kun taas pojat vaikuttavat itsevarmoilta omissa vastauksissaan. Näiden erojen on kuitenkin huomattu vähentyvän sen mukaan, mitä vanhemmaksi vastaajat tulevat, ja nämä erot ovat suurilta osin kadonneet yliopistoon päästyä. Asiaa tutkineet painottavat myös sitä, että minäpystyvyys ei ole ainoa tekijä, joka vaikuttaa yksilön suoriutumiseen. Vaikka minäpystyvyys tehtävää kohtaan olisi hyvä, yksilö ei luultavasti näe tehtävän eteen yhtä paljon vaivaa, jos hän ei pidä tehtävää tärkeänä. On oletettavaa, että esimerkiksi tämän tutkimuksen osallistujat pitävät liikeviestin kirjoittamista tärkeänä, koska suoriutuminen tehtävässä vaikuttaa merkittävästi heidän arvosanaansa.

Aineisto ja metodit

Aineiston keruun aikaan koehenkilöt osallistuivat Turun kauppakorkeakoulun järjestämälle englannin kurssille, joka kuuluu pakollisiin kielen ja liikeviestinnän opintoihin. Kurssin lopussa osallistujat kirjoittivat liikeviestin, joiden arvioita hyödynnettiin tutkimuksen aineistona. Yhteensä tutkimushenkilöitä oli 41 kappaletta, joista 23 oli miehiä ja 18 naisia. Opiskelijat olivat kaikki suomenkielisiä. Iältään he olivat 19–51-vuotiaita, joista suurin osa (73,2%) 19–21-vuotiaita.

Tutkimusaineisto koostui kirjoittajaminäpystyvyyttä mittaavasta mittaristosta sekä opiskelijoiden kirjoittamista ja kurssin opettajan arvioimista liikeviesteistä. Mittariston pohjana käytettiin Donald Prickelin kehittämää 25 väittämän mittaristoa, jota muokattiin tutkimukseen sopivammaksi ja lopulta suomennettiin, jotta kaikilla osallistujilla olisi yhtäläinen mahdollisuus arvioida itseään. Väittämiin vastattiin asteikolla 1–5, ja jokaisesta vastauksesta annettiin yhtä paljon pisteitä kuin valittu numero osoitti. Mittariston antamat pisteet määrittivät tutkimushenkilöiden minäpystyvyyden tason niin, että alle 75 pistettä saaneet osoittivat heikkoa, 75–99 pistettä saaneet kohtalaista ja 100 tai enemmän pisteitä saaneet hyvää minäpystyvyyden tasoa. Mittariston lisäksi opiskelijat vastasivat muutamaa taustakysymykseen koskien heidän aiempaa koulumenestystään englannin kielessä sekä saivat vapaasti kuvata itseään englannin kirjoittajina muutamalla sanalla. Liikeviestin arvioi kurssin opettaja, ja tekstin arviointi painottui liike-elämän termistön käyttöön. Sekä opiskelijoiden vastauksia että heidän arvosanojaan käsiteltiin koko tutkimuksen ajan luottamuksellisesti, ja tulokset muutettiin tunnistamattomaan muotoon antamalla jokaiselle koehenkilölle numerokoodi, jonka yhteydessä käytettiin vastaajan sukupuolta ilmaisevaa kirjainta M (mies) tai F (nainen).

Aineistoa tutkittiin sekä laadullisesti että määrällisesti. Laadullisessa analyysissä keskityttiin eritoten opiskelijoiden kirjoittajakuvauksiin ja tarkasteltiin, minkälaisia ne ovat suhteessa heidän aiempaan tasoonsa ja mittariston tuloksiin verrattuna. Vastausten pituus vaihteli parista sanasta kokonaisiin lauseisiin, ja niitä tyypiteltiin sisällön mukaan. Määrällinen analyysi toteutettiin Excelin sekä tilastotieteelliseen analyysiin suunnitellun ohjelmiston SPSS 25 avulla. Ohjelman avulla pystyttiin tarkastelemaan esimerkiksi kirjoittajaminäpystyvyyden ja tehtävästä suoriutumisen välistä korrelaatiota sekä vertailemaan keskiarvoja. Eroavaisuuksia tyttöjen ja poikien välillä tarkasteltiin läpi tutkimuksen kolmannen tutkimuskysymyksen mukaisesti.

Tulokset ja pohdinta

Ensin tutkimushenkilöiden kirjoittajakuvauksia tyypiteltiin kahteen kategoriaan sen mukaan, miten koehenkilöt olivat kuvanneet osaamistaan; osa kuvasi itseään *taitojensa ja osaamisensa* kautta, kun taas toiset keskittyivät *ominaisuuksiinsa* kirjoittajana. Suurin osa vastauksista sopi näiden kahden kategorian alle, mutta osa opiskelijoista kuvaili kirjoitustaitojaan myös suhteessa esimerkiksi sanasto- tai kielioppiosaamiseensa. Kuvauksia ja niiden sävyä verrattiin myös opiskelijoiden ilmoittamiin aiempaan koulumenestykseen ja taitojen sanalliseen kuvaukseen sekä minäpystyvyyssmittariston tulokseen. Eroavaisuuksia vastausten väliltä löytyi. Esimerkiksi erään naisopiskelijan vastaukset ja aiempi erinomainen koulumenestys englannissa viittasivat hyvään minäpystyvyyteen, mutta mittaristo sijoitti hänet kohtalaisen minäpystyvyyden tasolle. Sitä vastoin aiemmin koulussa englannissa 9 tasoinen oppilas kuvasi itseään ”verrattain huonoksi”, ja sijoittui mittaristossa huonon minäpystyvyyden tasolle. Nämä erot kirjoittajakuvausten ja aiemman koulumenestyksen välillä sekä niiden vertaaminen suoriutumiseen kirjoitustehtävässä olivatkin kiinnostavia havaintoja

Määrällinen tutkimus paljasti, että tutkimushenkilöiden minäpystyvyys on asteikolla heikosta hyvään keskimäärin kohtalaista. 59 % tutkimushenkilöistä sijoittui kohtalaisen, 24 % hyvän ja 17 % heikon minäpystyvyyden tasolle. Keskimäärin opiskelijat saivat mittaristosta 92 pistettä. Minäpystyvyyden tason määrittelemisen lisäksi huomattavaa oli, miten minäpystyvyydeltään samantasoiset opiskelijat saivat kirjoitustehtävässä erilaisia pistemääriä. Esimerkiksi koko tutkimuksen heikoimmat minäpystyvyydspisteet (62/125) saanut naisopiskelija suoriutui kirjoitustehtävästä kiitettävästi. Tilastotieteelliseen analyysiin suunnitellun ohjelmiston avulla saatiin selville, että tyttöjen ja poikien minäpystyvyyssmittariston pisteissä ei ollut tilastollisesti merkittävää eroa, vaikka naisopiskelijat saivatkin mittaristosta keskimäärin kaksi pistettä enemmän kuin miehet. Tytöt saivat keskimäärin korkeampia pistemääriä myös kirjoitustehtävästä, keskimäärin 16,3 pistettä 20 enimmäispistemäärästä. Pojat sen sijaan saivat keskimäärin 14,2 pistettä, ja t-testi paljasti tuloksen olevan tilastollisesti merkittävä. Pearsonin korrelaatiokerroin ei kuitenkaan osoittanut, että minäpystyvyyssmittariston pisteiden ja kirjoitustehtävän pisteiden välillä olisi ollut tilastollisesti merkittävää suhdetta.

Samankaltaisissa tutkimuksissa tytöt ovat suoriutuneet poikia paremmin kirjoitustehtävissä sellaisissa tilanteissa, joissa molempien taidot ja minäpystyvyys ovat olleet samalla tasolla. Samoin kävi myös tässä tutkimuksessa. Koehenkilöistä yhdeksän naista ja kahdeksan miestä saivat 90–99 pistettä minäpystyvyyssmittaristosta. Näiden kahdeksan miehen keskimääräinen pistemäärä kirjoitustehtävästä oli 13,5 pistettä, kun taas vastaavasti naiset saivat keskimäärin 17,1 pistettä. On siis selvää, että luottamus omiin kirjoitustaitoihin ei aina ole merkki hyvästä suoriutumisesta. Aiemmin aihetta tutkineet ovat pohtineet syitä yksilöiden minäpystyvyydestä esiintyville eroille. Erilaisten aiempien kokemusten, kannustuksen ja muiden mallien seuraamisen lisäksi on ehdotettu, että yksilöiden erilaiset tavat selittää omia epäonnistumisiaan vaikuttavat minäpystyvyyden kehittymiseen. Jos epäonnistuminen tehtävässä tulkitaan omien taitojen puutteeksi, usko omiin kykyihin heikentyy, mutta jos vaikeuksia perustellaan esimerkiksi vaikealla tehtävällä tai huonolla valmistautumisella, huonot kokemukset eivät vaikuta minäpystyvyyteen yhtä voimakkaasti. Tämän lisäksi tutkimushenkilöiden on saattanut olla vaikea arvioida mahdollisuuksiaan onnistua tehtävässä realistisesti, koska heillä ei oletettavasti ole aiempaa kokemusta juuri tämän kaltaisesta tehtävästä.

Minäpystyvyyden luotettava mittaaminen asettaa haasteita, koska se ei ole suoraan mitattavissa, vaan perustuu kunkin yksilön ilmoittamiin vastauksiin. Tämä pyrittiin ottamaan huomioon niin tutkimushenkilöitä kuin mittaristoa valittaessa. Yliopisto-opiskelijoiden voidaan olettaa osaavan arvioida osaamistaan paremmin kuin lasten, ja käyttämällä aiheen asiantuntijan kehittämää mittaristoa voidaan parantaa tulosten luotettavuutta. Pieni otos ei mahdollista tulosten yleistämistä tämän ryhmän ulkopuolelle, mutta tulokset antavat pohjan aiheen tarkastelulle. Kuten minäpystyvyydetutkijat ovat ilmaisseet, aiheen tutkiminen erilaisissa ympäristöissä ja kulttuureissa on tärkeää, jotta käsityksemme minäpystyvyyssäsitusten kehittymisestä ja positiivisten käsitysten tukemisesta niin kotona kuin sen ulkopuolella helpottuu.